VSiN PRO

COLLEGE FOOTBALL
BETTING GUIDE
PRO EDITION

BULLSEYE ON THE BUCKEYES
TIPS & STRATEGIES FOR BETTING COLLEGE FOOTBALL

OUR **PRO GUIDE** INCLUDES

- 136 TEAM PREVIEWS
- PRESEASON TOP 25
- BEST BETS FROM VSIN HOSTS AND EXPERTS

VSiN

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COMMON ABBREVIATIONS USED THROUGHOUT THIS GUIDE

ATS – Against the Spread • Avg - Average • CL – Closing Line • CONF – Conference • DC - Defensive Coordinator • DEF - Defense • DOG - Underdog
EFF STRG - Steve Makinen Effective Strength Rating • Fav - Favorite • FT – Final Total • HC - Head Coach • H2h – Head-to-Head • HOME FA – Home Field
Advantage • L - Losses • L# - Last number of games • LY – Last Year • MOV – Margin of Victory • O - Over • OC - Offensive Coordinator • Off - Offense
OL – Opening Line • OT – Opening Total • Opp – Opponent • O/U – Over/Under • PA - Points Against • PCT - Percentage • PF - Points For
PPG - Points Per Game • PRJL'S – Projected Losses • PRJW'S – Projected Wins • PYPG – Passing Yards per Page • ROAD FA – Road Field Advantage
RS - Returning Starters • RYPG – Rushing Yards per Game • SM BR - Steve Makinen Bettors' Rating • SM PR - Steve Makinen Power Rating
SS – Schedule Strength • SU - Straight Up • TO - Turnovers • TYPG – Total Yards per Game • U - Under • W - Wins • YPP – Yards per Play
YPPT – Yards per Point • YPR – Yards per Rush

VSIN STAFF/CONTRIBUTORS

ODDS WITHIN GUIDE ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Greetings, everyone!

Welcome to the 2025 VSiN College Football Betting Guide! This is probably the most important Guide that we put out because it is so hard to follow the college football offseason and we have previews for all 136 FBS teams to help you prepare for the season ahead.

To say that this is a team effort is an understatement, so before I explain more about what's in this year's edition, I'd like to thank Senior Editor Zachary Cohen, Editor Michael Dolan, Guide Designer Matt Devine, and Creative Director James "Jimmy" Coleman. We also had a ton of host participation in terms of best bets and heartfelt thanks go out to all of those who submitted picks and predictions.

Special thanks to these fantastic writers for the best preseason content you are going to find anywhere:

- Matt Youmans' Top 25 and SEC Previews
- Zachary Cohen's Heisman Trophy Overview and ACC and Big 12 Previews
- Jonathan Von Tobel's Mountain West and Pac-12 Previews
- Wes Reynolds' Big Ten Previews
- Adam Burke's Home-Field Advantage Values, New Head Coach Profiles, American, Conference USA, Independents, MAC, and Sun Belt Previews

And, of course, our VSiN Analytics Guru Steve Makinen, who has provided his Favorite Season Win Total Bets, Power Ratings Projections, and Stats and Ratings for all of the teams.

You can find VSiN on SiriusXM Channel 158, on the VSiN Watch App, on YouTube TV as part of the Sports+ package, on our YouTube page, on radio affiliates and regional sports networks across the country, wherever you get your podcast content, and through VSiN.com.

Tell your friends, tell your family, tell your colleagues and coworkers, tell anybody who will listen why now is the time to join us here at VSiN, THE Sports Betting Network.

Thank you for your support and good luck this college football season!

Adam Burke
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2025 SEASON PREDICTIONS

	GILL ALEXANDER	MATT BROWN	STORMY BUONANTONY	ADAM BURKE	ZACHARY COHEN	SEAN GREEN	WILL HILL	PAUL HOWARD	RYAN KRAMER	JENSEN LEWIS	STEVE MAKINEN	JOHN MCKECHNIE	MITCH MOSS	TIM MURRAY	WES REYNOLDS	SCOTT SEIDENBERG	TYLER SHOEMAKER	DUSTIN SWEDELSON	DAVE TULEY	NICK WHALEN	MATT YOUMANS	JONATHAN VON TOBEL
ACC CHAMPION	Miami	Clemson	Clemson	Clemson	Clemson	Georgia Tech	Clemson	Clemson	Pitt	Clemson	Clemson	Clemson	Clemson	Clemson	Clemson	Clemson	Clemson	Clemson	Clemson	Clemson	Louisville	Clemson
BIG TEN CHAMPION	Ohio State	Ohio State	Penn State	Ohio State	Penn State	Penn State	Ohio State	Penn State	USC	Ohio State	Ohio State	Ohio State	Penn State	Ohio State	Penn State	Penn State	Penn State	Oregon	Penn State	Penn State	Penn State	Penn State
BIG 12 CHAMPION	Utah	Utah	Utah	Baylor	Arizona State	Kansas	Utah	Baylor	Utah	Kansas State	Texas Tech	Kansas State	Arizona State	Utah	Kansas State	Texas Tech	Utah	Utah	Arizona State	Texas Tech	Utah	Utah
SEC CHAMPION	Alabama	Alabama	Alabama	Alabama	Texas	LSU	Alabama	Texas	Georgia	Texas	Alabama	Texas	Texas	Alabama	Texas	Texas	Texas	LSU	Texas	Georgia	Georgia	LSU
AAC CHAMPION	Tulane	UTSA	Tulane	UTSA	UTSA	Navy	Tulane	UTSA	Army	UTSA	Navy	Navy	Memphis	Memphis	Navy	Navy	Tulane	Tulane	Tulane	Tulane	UTSA	UTSA
CUSA CHAMPION	Liberty	Liberty	Liberty	Liberty	Liberty	Liberty	Liberty	Western Kentucky	Liberty	UTEP	Liberty	Western Kentucky	Liberty	Liberty	Liberty	Liberty	Liberty	Liberty	Liberty	Liberty	Louisiana Tech	Liberty
MAC CHAMPION	Toledo	Miami (OH)	Toledo	Toledo	Toledo	Miami (OH)	Toledo	Miami (OH)	Buffalo	Bowling Green	Toledo	Toledo	Miami (OH)	Buffalo	Buffalo	Toledo	Toledo	Buffalo	Toledo	Buffalo	Buffalo	Toledo
MWC CHAMPION	Boise State	Boise State	Boise State	Boise State	Boise State	San Jose State	Boise State	Boise State	San Jose State	Boise State	Boise State	UNLV	Boise State	Boise State	Boise State	Boise State	Boise State	San Jose State	Boise State	Boise State	Boise State	Boise State
SUN BELT CHAMPION	James Madison	James Madison	James Madison	James Madison	James Madison	James Madison	James Madison	James Madison	Texas State	James Madison	James Madison	South Alabama	South Alabama	James Madison	Georgia Southern	Southern Miss	James Madison	James Madison	James Madison	James Madison	James Madison	South Alabama
CFP FINAL FOUR #1	Ohio State	Ohio State	Penn State	Clemson	Texas	Penn State	Ohio State	Penn State	Georgia	Ohio State	Texas	Clemson	Penn State	Clemson	Texas	Clemson	Texas	Oregon	Texas	Georgia	Georgia	Penn State
CFP FINAL FOUR #2	Alabama	Clemson	Clemson	Alabama	Clemson	LSU	Alabama	Clemson	USC	Texas	Alabama	Penn State	Texas	Notre Dame	Penn State	Penn State	Ohio State	Clemson	Penn State	Clemson	Penn State	Alabama
CFP FINAL FOUR #3	Miami	Alabama	Alabama	Ohio State	Penn State	Kansas	Clemson	Oregon	Oregon	Clemson	Ohio State	Ohio State	Clemson	Ohio State	Clemson	Texas	Penn State	LSU	Arizona State	Penn State	Clemson	Ohio State
CFP FINAL FOUR #4	Utah	LSU	Utah	Baylor	Arizona State	Georgia Tech	Texas	Texas	Texas A&M	Penn State	Clemson	Texas	Alabama	Alabama	LSU	Ohio State	Clemson	Penn State	Notre Dame	Ohio State	Texas	Clemson
CFP TITLE GAME #1	Ohio State	Alabama	Penn State	Clemson	Texas	LSU	Ohio State	Penn State	Georgia	Ohio State	Texas	Clemson	Penn State	Ohio State	Texas	Clemson	Texas	Oregon	Texas	Penn State	Penn State	Penn State
CFP TITLE GAME #2	Alabama	Ohio State	Alabama	Ohio State	LSU	Penn State	Alabama	Texas	USC	Texas	Alabama	Penn State	Texas	Alabama	Penn State	Penn State	Ohio State	LSU	Penn State	Georgia	Texas	Alabama
CFP CHAMPION	Alabama	Alabama	Alabama	Ohio State	LSU	Penn State	Alabama	Texas	USC	Ohio State	Alabama	Penn State	Penn State	Alabama	Penn State	Clemson	Texas	LSU	Texas	Georgia	Texas	Penn State

OH1O STATE

MATT YOUMANS AND PAUL STONE ROLL OUT PRESEASON TOP 25

By Matt Youmans

Without knowing for certain the truth about Arch Manning, a quarterback phenom from a royal family, it's tough to rank Texas the preseason No. 1 team in the nation. It is tempting, but Manning and the Longhorns have yet to prove they deserve the top spot.

In fact, the team that ended Texas' 2024 season in a College Football Playoff semifinal will be its opponent to start this season. The Longhorns are 3-point underdogs at Ohio State on Aug. 30.

"We'll find out a lot about the new Texas starters and Arch Manning right off the bat," Fox Sports analyst Chris "The Bear" Fallica said. "We think they are loaded, but you just never know."

Find someone who loves you as much as "The Bear" loves the Buckeyes. Fallica supported Ohio State throughout last season and was rewarded for his loyalty at the end as the Buckeyes bombed Tennessee, Oregon, Texas and Notre Dame in four double-digit CFP wins en route to the national championship.

The VSiN preseason Top 25 for 2025 is a result of power rankings from me and Texas-based handicapper Paul Stone. After the two sets of rankings produced an average number for each team, there were some ties, and the team Stone ranked higher was given preference. Ohio State and Texas tied for the top ranking, so "The Bear" broke that tie — and, to no surprise, gave the edge to the Buckeyes.

The Buckeyes were favored in all 16 games last season, finished 14-2 and figure to be favored in each game of the upcoming regular season. Ohio State will have a much different look on both sides of the ball and on the sideline. Fifth-year senior quarterback Will Howard will be replaced by redshirt freshman Julian Sayin, a former No. 1-ranked recruit. Offensive coordinator Chip Kelly left for the Las Vegas Raiders and defensive coordinator Jim Knowles took the money ($3 million per year) and made a run for Penn State. Wide receiver Jeremiah Smith, whom coach Ryan Day says is "bigger and stronger and faster than he was last year," and safety Caleb Downs headline a team that still will be extremely talented.

FALLICA'S TOP 10	STONE'S TOP 10	YOUMANS' TOP 10
1. Ohio State	1. Penn State	1. Ohio State
2. Alabama	2. Texas	2. Texas
3. Texas	3. Ohio State	3. Georgia
4. Georgia	4. Georgia	4. Penn State
5. Penn State	5. LSU	5. Alabama
6. Oregon	6. Clemson	6. Clemson
7. Notre Dame	7. Alabama	7. Notre Dame
8. LSU	8. Notre Dame	8. LSU
9. Clemson	9. Oregon	9. Oregon
10 .Miami	10. Texas A&M	10. Michigan

"Ohio State having the best offensive (Smith) and defensive player (Downs) in the country is a pretty good way to start out a title defense," Fallica said.

In last year's VSiN Top 25, Georgia started No. 1 with Ohio State No. 2. Fallica remains high on the Bulldogs and new starting quarterback Gunner Stockton, who stepped in to beat Texas in the SEC title game before losing to Notre Dame in the CFP first round.

"I'm totally buying Georgia, which has only three true SEC road games, and nobody has recruited better than them in the last few years," Fallica said. "The biggest question this season for me is, can Gunnar Stockton play? If he can, this (No. 4) ranking is going to be low on the Bulldogs. Those I know close to the program who see him at practice say he absolutely can play. So we'll see if that materializes."

Aside from the favorites, Stone is bullish on three other SEC teams — LSU, Texas A&M and Florida. Stone predicts the Tigers will earn a spot in the 12-team playoff and called the Aggies and Gators "borderline Top 10 teams" which rate as "viable contenders" for the postseason tournament.

"In my opinion, LSU was the biggest winner in the transfer portal, especially on defense," Stone said.

Manning is the most hyped NFL prospect, but at least three other SEC quarterbacks are expected to be in the Heisman hunt — LSU's Garrett Nussmeier, South Carolina's LaNorris Sellers and Florida's DJ Lagway. Another rising star worth watching is Marcel Reed at Texas A&M.

"Reed certainly needs to improve as a passer, but he's a big-time running threat who will create headaches for opposing defenses," Stone said. "Lagway might be the most naturally-gifted quarterback in college football. If he can stay healthy, Florida's going to make some noise nationally. I could see Lagway in New York City for the Heisman presentation come early December."

Penn State might be the most polarizing team among title contenders. Stone power ranks the Nittany Lions at No. 1, as does national college football analyst Phil Steele. But "The Bear" is not yet buying the hype surrounding Penn State, which has lost eight straight meetings with Ohio State and hits the road to face the Buckeyes on Nov. 1.

"The thought that Penn State broke narratives last year couldn't be further from the truth," Fallica said. "All they did was solidify them. Penn State lost at home to Ohio State, lost the Big Ten title game to Oregon and then lost to Notre Dame in the CFP semifinals. So beating SMU at home and Boise State doesn't squash the narrative that the Nittany Lions need to win a big game."

When it comes to projecting power rankings, there are more than two or three sides to the story. Colorado-based professional bettor Eddie Walls, who specializes in college football handicapping the entire year, has a contrarian view of the top 10.

"I'm not going to agree with anyone," said Walls, who ranks Notre Dame No. 1, followed by Penn State, Clemson, Alabama, Ohio State, Texas, Georgia, LSU, Arizona State and Indiana. "I know that I normally hate Notre Dame, but I couldn't find any holes besides a five-star freshman quarterback."

Stone's power rankings, combined with my rankings, form the VSiN preseason Top 25.

1. OHIO STATE
When the Buckeyes were stunned by Michigan as 20-point home favorites, disgruntled fans (including VSiN's Adam Burke) understandably wanted to run coach Ryan Day out of town. Instead, Ohio State ran the table and won the Big Ten's second straight national title. Day did lose both coordinators and 14 players to the NFL Draft. While this team has the necessary talent, it lacks experience. Redshirt freshman quarterback Julian Sayin has plenty of playmakers around him, starting with receivers Jeremiah Smith and Carnell Tate. The top spot could change hands several times this season, but the Buckeyes have earned it until they get knocked off.

2. TEXAS
Arch Manning made two starts and attempted only 90 passes last season, but he will be the more experienced quarterback when the Longhorns open at Ohio State. Similar to the Buckeyes, Texas lost a lot of talent and is reloading with lots of talented yet inexperienced players. The nation's No. 3 scoring defense (15.3 PPG) lost cornerback Jahdae Barron, a first-round pick by the Broncos, and all four defensive line starters. Edge rusher Colin Simmons and linebacker Anthony Hill Jr. will be the leaders.

3. PENN STATE
An argument can be made the Nittany Lions possess the most experienced and talented roster and should power rank No. 1. There is no better running back duo than Kaytron Allen and Nick Singleton, who each rushed for more than 1,000 yards last season. Drew Allar goes into his third year as the starting quarterback and is behind an elite offensive line. The defense must replace Abdul Carter, the No. 5 overall pick by the Giants, but new coordinator Jim Knowles, who was bought from Ohio State, is a major coaching upgrade.

4. GEORGIA
The reigning SEC champion Bulldogs own a 53-5 record over the past four years, the best mark in college football. Much will depend on the growth of quarterback Gunner Stockton. Sophomore running back Nate Frazier is a rising star, as is USC transfer receiver Zachariah Branch. While the defense lost first-round picks Mykel Williams, Jalon Walker and Malaki Starks, it's a good bet that coach Kirby Smart's unit will be solid on all three levels with nose tackle Christen Miller, linebacker CJ Allen and safety KJ Bolden.

5. LSU
Brian Kelly and his coaching staff attacked the portal and hauled in arguably the nation's top-ranked transfer class. Fifth-year quarterback Garrett Nussmeier is a Heisman candidate after passing for 4,052 yards and 29 touchdowns last season. LSU's defense, which ranked 59th in scoring (24.3 PPG), will be vastly improved. Star linebacker Harold Perkins is back from a knee injury and junior linebacker Whit Weeks returns after totaling a team-high 125 tackles. Edge rusher Patrick Payton (Florida State) is one of many transfers who will step in to make a major impact.

6. ALABAMA
Is former five-star recruit Ty Simpson the definitive answer at quarterback? This coaching staff can be counted on to figure it out. Kalen DeBoer welcomes back his offensive coordinator at Washington, Ryan Grubb, who spent last season in the NFL. Star wideout Ryan Williams, who had a memorable 177-yard game against Georgia, and running back Jam Miller are set up for success behind a rock-solid line. Don't doubt the talent on a defense that has the potential to be dominant.

7. CLEMSON
Senior quarterback Cade Klubnik is coming off of a sensational season (36 touchdown passes, six interceptions) and will be a Heisman contender, especially if he beats LSU on Aug. 30. Clemson went 10-4 last season, a record that was less impressive when considering the lack of marquee wins, blowout losses to Georgia and Texas and home losses to Louisville and South Carolina. But this team could give coach Dabo Swinney another title shot with a high-scoring offense and rugged defense led by linemen T.J. Parker and Peter Woods.

8. NOTRE DAME
The Fighting Irish overcame a historically bad loss to Northern Illinois (28-point underdog) to reel off a 13-game win streak and reach the national championship game, so the doubters in coach Marcus Freeman became believers. Jeremiyah Love returns after rushing for 1,125 yards and 17 touchdowns, but quarterback Riley Leonard is history and redshirt freshman CJ Carr appears to be the future. Is Carr ready to step in and handle Miami, Texas A&M, Arkansas, Boise State and USC in the first two months? There are few to no concerns with Notre Dame's offensive line and defense.

9. OREGON
The Oregon offense once again has speed to burn, though it's not without one big question. Is Dante Moore, a UCLA transfer and former five-star recruit, the real deal? Moore must step in and run an offense that was directed by veterans Dillon Gabriel and Bo Nix. The defense gets a boost from transfers Bear Alexander (USC) and Dillon Thieneman (Purdue). Ducks coach Dan Lanning is recruiting at the highest level after winning 35 games in his first three years. The Big Ten champs were rolling until getting routed by Ohio State in a Rose Bowl playoff game.

10. MICHIGAN
A much-improved quarterback situation should make the Wolverines worthy of a Top 10 ranking or close to it. Michigan played three QBs who combined for 11 touchdown passes and 13 interceptions last season, but that team rallied to finish with victories over Ohio State and Alabama as a double-digit underdog in both games. Hyped freshman Bryce Underwood or Fresno State transfer Mikey Keene will lead new coordinator Chip Lindsey's offense. The defense remains strong despite losing NFL first-round picks Mason Graham and Kenneth Grant.

11. FLORIDA
Opinions on the Gators did a 180-degree turn after freshman quarterback DJ Lagway emerged as a dynamic playmaker and the team finished with a four-game win streak. Lagway has exciting potential, but he didn't throw much in the spring and summer because of a shoulder injury that could be troublesome if it lingers. Florida's experienced offensive line will be a strength, and the defense should be fine despite losing edge rusher Jack Pyburn as a transfer to LSU. The schedule is brutal, so coach Billy Napier is not quite off the hot seat yet.

12. MISSISSIPPI
It's hard to believe Ole Miss finished in the nation's top three in scoring offense and scoring defense last season yet missed the 12-team playoff. Rebels coach Lane Kiffin loses quarterback Jaxson Dart, a first-round pick by the Giants, and is ready to roll with redshirt sophomore Austin Simmons. While the defense will miss five NFL draft picks, junior linebacker Suntarine Perkins (10.5 sacks) returns to lead the way.

13. MIAMI
The Hurricanes could be a tough sell for those who don't buy Carson Beck as a quarterback or Mario Cristobal as a coach. Cristobal did go 10-3 last season, with the three losses by a total of 10 points, and Beck passed for 28 touchdowns for Georgia. Beck will not be an upgrade from Cam Ward, the NFL's No. 1 overall pick, but he's not bad and might surprise his critics. Miami will be hard to handle on the offensive and defensive lines.

14. TEXAS A&M
The development of sophomore quarterback Marcel Reed will likely determine if the Aggies rise in the SEC or underachieve again. Senior running back Le'Veon Moss, an experienced line and a better group of receivers will help Reed. A&M coach Mike Elko brings back eight starters from a solid defense (22.2 PPG), but he'll miss three starters who left for the NFL — first-round pick Shemar Stewart and second-rounders Nic Scourton and Shemar Turner.

15. OKLAHOMA
Washington State offensive coordinator Ben Arbuckle and quarterback John Mateer teamed to lead the Cougars to 36.6 points per game, the sixth-best scoring offense in the country. That's relevant because both were lured to Oklahoma, along with dynamic running back Jaydn Ott, a transfer from California. Mateer's 44 total touchdowns tied for No. 1 in the nation last season. Sooners coach Brent Venables will call the defense, which always will be his strength.

16. INDIANA
Curt Cignetti did the unimaginable last year by coaching Indiana to 11 wins and a playoff spot. The Hoosiers' two losses were to the teams which played for the national title — Ohio State and Notre Dame. The offense (41.3 PPG) will put up big numbers again, with Cal transfer quarterback Fernando Mendoza and Maryland transfer running back Roman Hemby joining leading receiver Elijah Sarratt and an impressive line. The defense looks solid. Cignetti's sequel should be another big winner.

17. ARIZONA STATE
Picked to finish 16th and last in the Big 12 media poll, the Sun Devils went 11-3 and blew out Iowa State in the conference title game. Third-year coach Kenny Dillingham brings back a majority of his stars, including quarterback Sam Leavitt (24 touchdown passes, six interceptions) and wideout Jordyn Tyson. The departure of bulldozing running back Cam Skattebo (1,711 rushing yards and 17 TDs) is fuel for skeptics. The Sun Devils have the talent on both sides of the ball to make another playoff run.

18. LOUISVILLE
How good is Jeff Brohm? Look at what has happened to Purdue, a team he coached to the Big Ten title game, since Brohm left. He's 19-8 in two years at Louisville and the arrow is pointing up thanks to an experienced team and the arrival of quarterback Miller Moss, a USC transfer. Moss is supported by a pair of outstanding running backs, Isaac Brown and Duke Watson, and an offensive line with more than 200 career starts. The Cardinals, who host Clemson on Nov. 14, could be ACC title contenders.

19. BAYLOR
The Bears feature two of the Big 12's best in quarterback Sawyer Robertson and running back Bryson Washington. Baylor went 6-1 in its final seven games last year, losing to LSU in the Texas Bowl, and coach Dave Aranda has an experienced roster. While the success of the offense is a certainty, the defense is a mystery. The Bears will get a stress test right away by playing Auburn, SMU and Arizona State in the first four weeks.

20. SOUTH CAROLINA
LaNorris Sellers, a 6-foot-3, 240-pounder with a strong arm and superb athletic ability, passed for 2,534 yards, rushed for 674 yards and totaled 25 touchdowns as a redshirt freshman. Running back Rahsul Faison is an impact addition as a transfer from Utah State. The ceiling is high for Sellers and the offense, but a defense that ranked 12th in scoring (18.1 PPG) did lose six players to the NFL Draft. Shane Beamer is a coach to bet on, but a rebuilt defense is probably going to be a problem.

21. KANSAS STATE
Chris Klieman has coached Kansas State to 36 wins in the past four years, including a 9-4 record and bowl win last season. Several key players must be replaced, but dual-threat quarterback Avery Johnson (32 total touchdowns) and leading receiver Jayce Brown are back. Colorado transfer Dylan Edwards takes over as the featured running back. The Wildcats open the season in Dublin, Ireland on Aug. 23 against Iowa State, another Big 12 title contender which came in at No. 26 in these power rankings.

22. AUBURN
Tigers coach Hugh Freeze's offense was far from hot last season, ranking 71st in scoring, and to change things Freeze brought in transfer quarterback Jackson Arnold from Oklahoma. Georgia Tech transfer Eric Singleton is expected to be a difference-making receiver. Junior defensive end Keldrick Faulk, who had seven sacks last year, is the only returning starter in the front seven. Freeze is betting big on Arnold and other transfers.

23. UTAH
Poor quarterback play doomed the Utes, who started 4-0 and finished 5-7 last year. A lot went wrong, including the officiating in a controversial 22-21 loss to BYU. Kyle Whittingham, entering his 21st year as coach, usually gets it right. Utah landed quarterback Devon Dampier as a transfer from New Mexico and running back Wayshawn Parker as a Washington State transfer. Dampier totaled 31 touchdowns for the Lobos, but 19 of those were on the ground and he must improve as a passer. The Utes' offensive line and defensive front will be strengths.

24. SMU
The Mustangs were no match for Penn State in a 38-10 first-round playoff loss that ended their season at 11-3. SMU coach Rhett Lashlee should not be underestimated and his offense will be legit again with Kevin Jennings returning at quarterback. Jennings was awful on the road against the Nittany Lions, but he's a dual-threat talent who should bounce back.

25. TEXAS TECH
Fourth-year coach Joey McGuire can't complain about resources because Texas Tech is pouring money into this program. McGuire's huge transfer class could pay off. Behren Morton (27 touchdown passes) returns, but leading rusher Tahj Brooks (1,505 yards and 17 touchdowns) does not. The Red Raiders brought in USC transfer Quinten Joyner to help replace Brooks, and all 11 projected starters on defense are veterans.

VSIN HOST COLLEGE FOOTBALL

BEST BETS

TYLER SHOEMAKER

SOUTHERN MISS OVER 5.5 WINS +125

Southern Miss basically just took everyone from a successful Marshall team and brought them to Mississippi, including star QB Braylon Braxton and head coach Charles Huff. I think the market is sleeping on this team, as they were just picked second to last in their division in the Sun Belt preseason poll, but I think they have a legit chance to win the whole conference and sail Over their win total. My T Shoe Index (conservatively) has them at 6.3 wins, and I think that's the floor for this team as their average opponent power rating is -13.7.

TIM MURRAY

CLEMSON TO WIN ACC (+110 AT FANDUEL SPORTSBOOK)

On May 18, the first bet I made this offseason was Clemson to win the ACC at +140 at DraftKings Sportsbook. While the price has come down a little, I still think it is worth a play at plus money. Despite having a "down year" in 2024, with three regular season losses (only one ACC loss), the Tigers still beat SMU in the ACC Championship and made the College Football Playoff. This year, Clemson is #1 in the nation returning production and brings back arguably the best quarterback in the country, Cade Klubnik. Klubnik is entering his third year as the starter at Clemson and it will also be his third season in Garrett Riley's system. Last year, Klubnik threw 36 touchdowns and just six interceptions. Clemson returns a trio of solid wide outs (Antonio Williams, Bryant Wesco, TJ Moore) and added veteran offensive line coach Matt Luke to the staff. Defensively, Dabo Swinney fired defensive coordinator Wes Goodwin and hired former Indiana head coach Tom Allen to replace Goodwin. A clear upgrade. Clemson has one of the best defensive line units in the nation and added Purdue DE Will Heldt to the group (Yes, it is true… Dabo Swinney went into the portal).

Clemson avoids Miami in the regular season but does have two potentially tricky conference road trips to Georgia Tech (Sept. 13) and Louisville (Nov. 14). The Tigers host SMU (Oct. 18) as well. Clemson should be favored in every ACC game this year. When the Tigers make it to the ACC Championship, they should be the favorite in Charlotte on December 6. I expect Clemson to win the title but having a plus price heading into the championship will give us a hedge and/or middle opportunity.

SYRACUSE UNDER 5.5 WINS (-160 AT DRAFTKINGS SPORTSBOOK)

Fran Brown did a fantastic job in his first year as the head coach of Syracuse leading the Orange to nine regular season wins and a bowl victory. This year, however, will be quite the challenge. According to ESPN's Bill Connelly, Syracuse returns just 48% of production from last season, worst in the ACC. QB Kyle McCord led the nation with 4,779 passing yards a year ago but he was drafted in the sixth round of the NFL Draft by the Philadelphia Eagles. McCord's top three receivers all departed too: Jackson Meeks, Trebor Pena (transferred to Penn St.), Oronde Gadson II. The trio combined for 2,896 receiving yards and 23 touchdowns. Additionally, RB LeQuint Allen graduated to the NFL as well. Allen rushed for 1,021 yards and 16 touchdowns.

Not only is all that offensive production gone but the schedule is BRUTAL. The Orange open the season against Tennessee in Atlanta where the Vols are a 14-point favorite. Additionally, Syracuse will travel to Clemson, SMU, Georgia Tech, Miami, and Notre Dame. The Orange will be an underdog in all five of those road contests. At home, Syracuse still faces Duke, North Carolina, Pittsburgh, and UConn. All four are projected to finish above .500. Outside of playing Boston College in the season finale, the Orange do not play any of the perceived worst teams in the ACC this year.

BOISE STATE TO WIN MOUNTAIN WEST (-125 AT CIRCA SPORTSBOOK)

Heading into my offseason prep, I was not expecting to place a bet on Boise St. to win the Mountain West after the Broncos lost Heisman Trophy runner up Ashton Jeanty. However, the Broncos seem primed to make another run to the College Football Playoff in 2025. Believe it or not, Boise State has the most returning production of any team in the Mountain West. There is also a lot of excitement coming out of Boise about redshirt freshman RB Sire Gaines as well as Fresno St. transfer RB Malik Sherrod. QB Maddux Madsen is back for another season and the Boise offensive line is the best in the Mountain West.

Boise St. was picked to win the Mountain West for an 18th straight season in the preseason. The Broncos get to host UNLV (#2 in the preseason poll) and Colorado State (#4 in the preseason poll) as well as avoid playing San Jose State (#3 in the preseason poll). A trip to Colorado Springs in September to face Air Force will be challenging but the Broncos will be favored in every Mountain West game this season. If the Mountain West Championship is back on the blue turf in Boise, the Broncos will be a significant favorite to win.

SAN JOSE STATE TO REACH MOUNTAIN WEST CHAMPIONSHIP (+190 AT DRAFTKINGS SPORTSBOOK)

When the Mountain West Conference arrived at Circa for their media days this summer, San Jose State garnered a lot of buzz… and rightfully so. Head coach Ken Niumatalolo is one of the most respected head coaches in college football and despite having a relatively unknown roster last year after Brent Brennan departed for Arizona, the Spartans won seven games in Coach Ken's first season in the Bay Area. This year, San Jose State returns the third-most production in the Mountain West including QB Walker Eget. Niumatalolo said on VSiN Primetime that the difference between this offseason and last is "not even close" in regards to Eget. The Spartans do have to replace one of the nation's most productive receivers in Nick Nash (104 receptions, 1,396 receiving yards, 16 TD) but the Spartans like the pass catchers they brought in via the portal. Offensive coordinator Craig Stutzmann is one of the most creative minds in the nation with his "Spread-and-Shred" offense.

Lastly, San Jose State won the "schedule lottery" this year. The Spartans do not face Boise State (#1 in the Mountain West preseason poll), UNLV (#2), or Colorado State (#4). Additionally, San Jose State hosts Fresno State (#5), Air Force (#6), and Hawaii (#7). The path to an appearance in the Mountain West Championship is there for the Spartans in Year 2 of the Coach Ken era.

HAWAII OVER 5.5 WINS (-144 FANDUEL SPORTSBOOK)

Entering Year 4 under Rainbow Warrior legend Timmy Chang, Hawaii has a home schedule that is ideal to reach bowl eligibility. The Rainbow Warriors open up the season with a Week Zero game against Stanford in Honolulu and therefore will have three bye weeks throughout the rest of the season. Chang is excited about redshirt freshman QB Micah Alejado, who made his first career start in last season's finale against New Mexico. The Bishop Gorman High School product threw for 469 yards and five touchdowns as well as rushed for 54 yards. Alejado was the only FBS player to have 450+ pass yards and 50+ rush yards in a game in 2024. Hawaii returns its top two receivers in Nick Cenacle and Pofele Ashlock. The duo combined for over 120 receptions, 1,300 yards and 12 touchdowns last year. Defensive coordinator Dennis Thurman welcomes back nine starters and should continue to improve.

Hawaii went 6-1 ATS at home last year (second-best home cover percentage in FBS) and should be favored in all seven home games this season. With no Boise State on the schedule, there are plenty of "toss up" games for the Rainbow Warriors, but I expect Hawaii to win at least six games and reach bowl eligibility for the first time under Chang as coach.

UTAH TO WIN THE BIG 12 (+600 AT DRAFTKINGS SPORTSBOOK & FANDUEL SPORTSBOOK)

"I couldn't stomach going out with that season…"

Utah head coach Kyle Whittingham is back for another year following last year's disastrous 5-7 season. After the Utes started 4-0, Utah

Maddux Madsen

dropped seven straight games (five by one possession). According to ESPN's Bill Connelly, the Utes were the least fortunate team in the power conferences last year. Is Utah due for some positive regression in 2025? Coach Whittingham made a big swing this offseason bringing in New Mexico offensive coordinator Jason Beck and Lobos QB Devon Dampier. Dampier is a dynamic athlete with massive upside. I placed a 100-1 longshot Heisman bet (85-1 is currently available at Circa) on Dampier this offseason. Dampier rushed for 1,166 yards and 19 touchdowns last year and now he will be playing behind the best offensive line in the Big 12. Additionally, the Utes added WR Ryan Davis (54 receptions, 747 receiving yards) from New Mexico as well as RB Wayshawn Parker from Washington State. The Utes did lose WR1 Zacharyus Williams to USC in the spring portal.

Defensively, Utah will always be stingy under veteran defensive coordinator Morgan Scalley.

The Utes do have to play three of the top teams in the Big 12 (Arizona State, Texas Tech, Kansas State) this year but all three come to Rice-Eccles Stadium. In a wide open Big 12 conference, I will take a shot on a high upside quarterback, elite offensive line, and a motivated veteran head coach.

MATT YOUMANS

MISSOURI OVER 7 WINS (-115)
Eli Drinkwitz, who went 11-2 in 2023 and 10-3 last season, must coach up a new-look Tigers team after losing three-year starting quarterback Brady Cook and star receiver Luther Burden. Drinkwitz should win big again this season due to several additions in the transfer portal on both sides of the ball, including quarterback Beau Pribula (Penn State), running back Ahmad Hardy (UL Monroe), defensive end Damon Wilson (Georgia) and linebacker Josiah Trotter (West Virginia). Another important factor in Missouri's success is a schedule that might be the softest in the SEC. Six teams had losing records in conference play last season, and five of those are on the Tigers' schedule. Drinkwitz also gets his first six games at home. Seven wins would be a disappointing result, but look for Drinkwitz to get Over that number. Circa Sports has posted 7, which is a bargain because most other books are at 7.5.

TEXAS A&M UNDER 8.5 WINS (-150)
The Aggies are attracting a lot of preseason hype and it is easy to get pumped up about the potential of senior running back Le'Veon Moss, dual-threat quarterback Marcel Reed and an experienced offensive line. However, Mike Elko is an overrated coach who struggles in some important game-management situations. Elko returns eight starters from a solid defense, but he'll miss the three starters who left for the NFL — first-round pick Shemar Stewart and second-rounders Nic Scourton and Shemar Turner. The schedule is tough as Texas A&M faces Notre Dame on the road in September prior to trips to LSU, Missouri and Texas. The most difficult home tests will be against Florida and South Carolina. Elko could win eight games again, but that's probably the ceiling unless Reed turns into a superstar. Circa posted the right win total at 8, so the better bet is Under 8.5 at DraftKings.

KENTUCKY UNDER 4.5 WINS (-105)
The end seems near for Mark Stoops, who has had a good 12-year run as Wildcats coach despite slumping to 4-8 last season. Stoops is counting on journeyman quarterback Zach Calzada, a transfer from Incarnate Word and Texas A&M, to help turn Kentucky around in his seventh college season and it's a risky bet. If the Wildcats can handle Toledo, Eastern Michigan and Tennessee Tech, they would need two more wins to go Over a low total. The worst teams in the league, aside from Kentucky, are Arkansas and Mississippi State and those opponents are not on Stoops' schedule.

STANFORD UNDER 3.5 WINS (-170)
After four consecutive 3-9 seasons, Stanford is starting over. Troy Taylor was fired as coach and the program's new general manager, Andrew Luck, hired former NFL head coach Frank Reich as the replacement. Luck and Reich eventually could get it right, but they have a long way to go. The Cardinal offense lacks playmakers and the defense was a disaster last season while allowing 33.7 points per game. There are probably five winnable games on the schedule — at Hawaii, Boston College, at Virginia, San Jose State, California — but expect another three-win finish.

Micah Ford

PURDUE OVER 2.5 WINS (-180)

Barry Odom won a total of 20 games the past two years at UNLV, but it will be a tougher task to turn around the Boilermakers after they hit rock bottom at 1-11. A horrendous coaching staff has been replaced by Odom and a good staff, so expect this team to be much more competitive with an infusion of transfers. Senior running back Devin Mockobee is the top returning player, and Odom has a few promising quarterbacks who will improve an abysmal offense. Purdue should win its first two games against Ball State and Southern Illinois, leaving 10 shots for Odom to pull an upset and get Over a low win total. The October schedule includes Illinois, Minnesota, Northwestern and Rutgers, and somewhere in there Odom should find his first Big Ten win.

SCOTT SEIDENBERG

CLEMSON TO WIN THE ACC (+105),
CLEMSON TO MAKE THE CFB PLAYOFF (-200),
CLEMSON TO WIN THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP (10-1),
CADE KLUBNIK TO WIN THE HEISMAN TROPHY (+950)

Clemson has everything going right for them this season. The Tigers lead the nation in returning production from a season ago, a team that won 10 games, won the ACC Championship Game, and gave Texas fits in the CFB Playoff. Cade Klubnik really came into his own last year as well, accounting for 43 total touchdowns (36 passing) and only six interceptions and now he will have the luxury of throwing to one of the best wide receiver corps Clemson has seen. Antonio Williams (11 TDs) leads the pack, with TJ Moore and Bryant Wesco Jr. as legit weapons. Plus, Dabo Swinney actually went to the transfer portal this year and brought in Tristan Smith from South East Missouri State, a 6-5, 205 pound big leaping target, who caught 76 passes for 934 yards and six scores last season. Throw in four returning offensive linemen and Klubnik, who is in his third year in the offense, has all the tools needed to thrive.

On defense, Swinney hired former Indiana head coach and Penn State defensive coordinator Tom Allen to resurrect this unit. The Tigers are loaded with NFL caliber talent on the defensive side of the ball, and Purdue transfer Will Heldt will compliment TJ Parker on what should be one of the nations best pass rushes.

The Tigers open the season with their toughest opponent in LSU. But as of now, Clemson sits as a 3-point home favorite in that game. In fact, Clemson will be favored in all 12 of their games this season. Even if they suffer a hiccup along the way, this team has the talent to finish with at least 10 wins and a trip to the ACC Championship Game. Win that and there is the potential for a first round bye in the CFB Playoff. The Tigers top my list of best bets to make the CFB Playoff and have a really good shot at the national title.

OHIO STATE UNDER 10.5 WINS (-150)

Let me start off by saying: the talent is there for the defending national champs to have yet another solid season. But 11 wins is asking too much. Ohio State will be working in a new quarterback this year and while it's an open competition during training camp, all signs point to Julian Sayin being the guy in Columbus. Having Jeremiah Smith, who showed last year he is one of the best WRs in the country, is certainly a help for the new quarterback, but there is still a ton of pressure that I'm not sure is handled.

The Buckeyes will be working with two new coordinators this year. Brian Hartline takes over the offense after Chip Kelly's departure, and Matt Patricia will run the defense in his first college coaching role since leaving the NFL. That cannot go overlooked. Then there is the schedule. Ohio State opens with Texas, will play Penn State, and travel out west for a game at Washington. Oh, and we can't forget about "that team up north," the same team that beat OSU four years in a row. One other aspect that needs to be brought up: the experience factor.

Last season, Ohio State made it a point to be healthy and strong at the end of the season. Knowing the new world of college football, with a 12-team expanded playoff, Ryan Day and Kelly made it a point to slow down during the regular season. With every game no longer being do or die, teams can afford to lose 1-2 games — and sometimes three — and still get into the playoffs. Then it's a war of attrition. Last season, Ohio State ran about 150 less plays on offense than a season before, playing into the idea of prioritizing rest/stamina for the long haul. A similar approach could be in store this season with the experience they gained going through the playoffs last year.

A 10-2 season and a trip to the Big Ten Championship Game/CFB Playoff is an incredibly successful season, but it still goes Under 10.5 wins!

DAVE TULEY

TEXAS +485 TO WIN NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

Yes, this is a little chalky for my liking, but Texas is my pick to win it all in the Picks Grid elsewhere in this VSiN CFB Betting Guide, so I have to put my money where my mouth is. When I think of this Texas team with head coach Steve Sarkisian. I'm reminded of 45 years ago in my youth when Bum Phillips, the colorful Houston Oilers head coach, famously said: "Last year we knocked on the door. This year we beat on it. Next year we're going to kick the son of a bitch in." Now, Sarkisian isn't as flamboyant as ole Bum, but he's had the Longhorns knocking on the door and I thought they were going to do it last season until losing to eventual champ Ohio State in the CFB Playoff Semifinals. This looks like their year with Arch Manning (5-1 Heisman Trophy favorite) leading the way.

TEXAS +3 AT OHIO STATE IN WEEK 1 (AUG. 30)

This is the rematch of that national semifinal with Ohio State basically being favored due to the game being played in Columbus. The loser of this game won't be eliminated from CFB Playoff consideration (especially since conference games still hold more importance), but it's a great statement game and revenge spot for the Longhorns. Back in January, Texas was driving for the tying touchdown before fumbling the ball away and Ohio State's Jack Sawyer went 83 yards the other way for a scoop and score to seal the Buckeyes' victory. Ohio State won 28-14, but it was pretty much a coin-flip game until that spot that could have gone either way. I'll take the field goal in what should be another tight battle to set the tone for this season.

ARIZONA STATE OVER 8.5 (+120) WINS, +600 TO WIN BIG 12, +475 TO MAKE CFB PLAYOFF

I was slow to respect the Sun Devils last year in their first season in the Big 12 as they were 3-9 in 2023, but became a believer as they went 7-2 in the league play in their Big 12 debut and routed Iowa State 45-19 to win the conference championship and made the CFB Playoff before losing 39-31 to Texas in double overtime. ASU obviously loses star RB Cam Skattebo to the NFL, but the cupboard isn't bare for coach Kenny Dillingham and the Sun Devils should again be competitive. In fact, they might be favored in every regular season game, so while only two losses might be hard to avoid with a bulls-eye on their back, 9-3 is achievable. The 6-1 odds to repeat as Big 12 champs is very fair, though I think the better bet might be +475 to make the CFB Playoff in case they have to settle for an at-large bid this time.

ZACHARY COHEN

I don't play everything I write up in my conference previews. So, you'll see leans more often than best bets when reading my work on the ACC and Big 12. However, I did end up taking nine win totals between the two conferences: Duke Over 6.5 Wins (-160), Florida State Over 6.5 Wins (-130), Miami Under 9.5 Wins (-155), Pittsburgh Over 6.5 Wins (+140), Syracuse Under 5.5 Wins (-160), Cincinnati Over 6.5 Wins (+120), Houston Over 6.5 Wins (+120), Utah Over 7.5 Wins (-135), West Virginia Under 5.5 Wins (-140)

Kendrick Bell

In addition to those, I have the following five futures:

ALABAMA UNDER 9.5 WINS (+105)

I was pretty high on Alabama heading into last season, but Kalen DeBoer's first year in Tuscaloosa was a little disappointing. This season, people are relatively high on the Crimson Tide, and I can see why there's optimism.

Alabama's offensive line should be a lot better than it was a year ago, which should mean a big season for Jam Miller and the rest of a talented backfield. There's also some serious weaponry at receiver; Ryan Williams is a megastar, plus DeBoer landed a stud in the portal in Miami's Isaiah Horton. On top of that, DeBoer has his play caller, Ryan Grubb, back from a short stint with the Seattle Seahawks.

On defense, the Tide have eight players with starting experience back, and some are highly-talented transfers. That'll give Kane Womack a shot at building an elite unit, and we should see some great play from the secondary.

My issue with Alabama is that the quarterback situation is questionable. I know Jalen Milroe underperformed last season, but the offensive line didn't do him any favors. This year, the line will be better, but it's hard to get excited about Ty Simpson — if he can hold off Austin Mack and Keelon Russell.

Simpson deserves some love for sticking with Alabama for three years despite not playing. Plenty of guys would have bailed. But Simpson seems like more of a game manager than anything else. That should be enough for the Tide to win home games against good competition and road games against lesser competition. But will it be enough in road games against Florida State, Georgia, Missouri, South Carolina and Auburn? And what about home games against LSU and Oklahoma? In order for Bama to go Over a 9.5-win total, the team can only lose two of those games.

At plus-money odds, the Under seems like a no-brainer here.

MICHIGAN OVER 8.5 WINS (-160)

In an ideal world, Michigan freshman Bryce Underwood, who is apparently making between $10.5 million and $12 million in NIL, will win the starting quarterback job. However, even if he can't beat out Fresno State transfer Mikey Keene, the Wolverines will be in much better shape under center than they were in 2024.

This is a team that won seven regular season games in 2024, which is actually quite remarkable for a group that was 123rd in the nation in YPP (4.6). Well, with an improved offense, things should look a lot better in 2025.

I'm pretty high on the quarterback situation, the offensive line is expected to be better and there's talent when looking at the running backs and pass catchers. Also, offensive coordinator Chip Lindsey has proven that he can build out an efficient offense.

The defense is going to be tremendous again this year. Michigan has an incredible secondary, plus the team added some big boys along the defensive line in Alabama transfer Damon Payne and Clemson transfer Tre Williams. The Wolverines also have one of the nation's best linebacking corps.

This is just a tough, physical program that now has a little more talent and explosivity, and the schedule is reasonable. Michigan gets Ohio State at home, and the toughest road games the team will play come against Oklahoma and USC. That's why I'm biting the bullet with the juice and going Over 8.5. Honestly, I think 10 wins is more likely than eight.

WISCONSIN OVER 2.5 CONFERENCE WINS (-175)

As a Wisconsin fan, I didn't expect to be going the positive route this year. This program has sucked the life out of me over the last couple of years. However, I was stunned when I saw this number available at DraftKings.

The Badgers don't have an easy conference schedule this year, as they'll play road games against Michigan, Oregon and Indiana. They'll also host Ohio State. They're probably looking at four losses there. But Wisconsin really can't win three of the following five games: vs. Maryland, vs. Iowa, vs. Washington, vs. Illinois, at Minnesota? Yeah, I'll take the bait here.

Wisconsin's defense should be pretty good. The Badgers only gave up 23.1 points per game last year, and they did that despite being soft against the run. Well, they loaded up on big bodies in the portal, so they should be able to fix the rushing defense. That would be huge considering they have one of the best secondaries in the Big Ten.

It's also hard not to like the offense a little. Wisconsin has four players that started along the offensive line in 2024, and running back Dilin Jones should have no problem hitting some holes. The passing game should also be a little more efficient. Billy Edwards never did anything spectacular at Maryland, but he gets the ball out quickly and accurately. He's also decent with his legs. That should be enough for new offensive coordinator Jeff Grimes to work with, especially with Wisconsin having a talented wide receiver room. Speaking of Grimes, we're going to see a return to smashmouth football from the Badgers, and they have proven that they can win when operating that way.

CINCINNATI TO WIN BIG 12 (35-1)

This one is absolutely a dart throw. If you're tailing, make sure it's a smaller play. However, when writing up the Big 12 previews, it stood out how possible it is to make the Big 12 Championship Game with two or three losses — which was also the case last season. And, while falling in love with Cincinnati in diving into this team's numbers and depth chart, it was hard not to notice how manageable the team's schedule is.

Cincinnati's road games will be against Kansas, Oklahoma State, Utah and TCU, and I feel pretty good about the team going 2-2 in those contests, at the very worst. The Bearcats would then need to just take care of business at home.

The Bearcats have eight players with starting experience back on defense, and three of the new transfers should patch up what was a leaky secondary in 2024. And offensively, Cincinnati has an underrated quarterback in Brendan Sorsby, some good pass-catching options and an offensive line that should be solid enough for Scott Satterfield to have the type of offense he wants to run.

I just think this is going to be a roller coaster of a season in the Big 12, and Cincinnati's roster screams consistency. That could be enough for the Bearcats to sneak into the game, and I'd love to have a 35-1 ticket if they do. I'll also note that Year 3 was when Appalachian State made the leap under Satterfield, going 11-2 in 2015.

LSU TO WIN NATIONAL TITLE (19-1)
LSU's schedule is a freaking nightmare. It starts with a trip to Clemson, but Brian Kelly's team will also have to deal with the following: vs. Florida, at Ole Miss, vs. South Carolina, vs. Texas A&M, at Alabama, at Oklahoma. Dealing with that is going to be very tough, but I want a piece of this roster and coaching staff at 19-1 odds.

I wrote about Garrett Nussmeier as a Heisman Trophy play elsewhere in this guide, and I genuinely believe he's the best pure passer in the country. The Tigers also have all the talent you can possibly want at wide receiver, and I'm looking forward to seeing what a burner like Barion Brown can do in a pass-first offense. He was electric at Kentucky, but the quarterback play was abysmal. We'll just have to hope the offensive line does its part.

The real question with LSU is, how will the defense look in Year 2 under Blake Baker? I tend to think it'll be strong. Baker became the highest-paid defensive coordinator in the nation for a reason: The work he did at Missouri was tremendous. Well, Kelly and Baker went out and hit the portal absurdly hard, adding several stars in the secondary to address the fact that they were outside the top 50 in Dropback EPA per play (-0.03) allowed last year. The staff also filled some holes elsewhere, plus the team has some future pros returning, including Harold Perkins.

I know there's some noise about a potential Nick Saban return in Baton Rouge, but this team can accomplish anything if things click.

NICK WHALEN

TEXAS TECH TO WIN THE BIG 12 (+650)
The Big 12 feels fairly wide open at the top, but Texas Tech is my favorite value on the board. The Red Raiders are coming off of an 8-5 season in which their defense allowed 37, 59, 35, 41 and 39 points in those losses. With money pouring into the program at an unprecedented clip, Texas Tech hit the portal and brought in the nation's No. 2-ranked transfer class, headlined by a number of difference-makers on the defense.

Fixing that side of the ball is clearly the top priority, and the Red Raiders also brought in a new defensive coordinator in Shiel Wood. On top of the monster transfer class, Texas Tech returns plenty of talent from a team that ranked fourth in FBS in scoring last season. Quarterback Behren Morton may not be a star, but he's a steady presence who took a significant leap forward last season, throwing for 27 touchdowns and just eight picks on over 460 attempts.

Schedule-wise, Texas Tech should be able to mostly take care of business at home, but getting Utah, Arizona State, Kansas State and Houston on the road is a tough draw. Nonetheless, the Red Raiders certainly have the talent to push for a conference title.

UTAH OVER 7.5 WINS (-135)
Alongside Texas Tech, Utah is my other favorite in the Big 12. Coming off of their worst season in over a decade, the Utes have some work to do, but they return plenty of experience – particularly on offense – and were able to land some difference-makers in the portal on defense. As usual, Kyle Whittingham's defense was not the issue last season, as Utah allowed just 20.7 points per game.

But the offense ranked outside of the top-100 in FBS in scoring while dealing with injuries and a rotating cast of characters at quarterback. Now,

in steps Devon Dampier (60/1 to win the Heisman Trophy), who's coming off of an electric season at New Mexico in 2024. While Dampier still needs to improve as a passer, he ran for over 1,000 yards and 19 touchdowns a year ago and should infuse a much-needed jolt into the Utes' offense.

Dampier is enough of a wild card that I prefer the win total to Utah winning the Big 12, though I'm certainly open to both options. But the schedule is another reason to look O7.5 wins. Utah opens against UCLA (currently a 6.5-point favorite) before taking on Cal Poly and Wyoming in advance of conference play. In the Big 12, the Utes get Texas Tech, Arizona State, Kansas State and BYU at home. While they do travel to Baylor and Kansas late in the season, the Baylor game comes after a bye. At no point in the entire schedule does Utah play back-to-back road games.

STEVE MAKINEN

ARIZONA OVER 4.5 WINS
Some of the teams that made big conference transitions last year didn't fare quite as well as others with the new conditions. Arizona was one of those, but to be fair, the program was also working with a new head coach in Brent Brennan. In '23, QB Noah Fifita was a star, leading the Wildcats to a 10-3 mark. In '24 he struggled in the new system and conference. In his junior season, I expect him to rebound to frosh-form, and with the Big 12 being projected as a wide-open conference once again, I wouldn't discount Arizona's chances at being a "surprise" team this fall. With 16 starters back for '25, and wiping the slate clean from terrible turnover luck in '24, this team is already on better footing. I expect them back in a bowl game in December.

ILLINOIS OVER 7.5 WINS
This is what I wrote about Illinois in my recent recruiting rankings piece: Fifth year coach Bret Bielema brought in another solid Illinois' recruiting class this spring and it's clear that he has established a new standard in that area where the program did struggle previously. The results are showing on the field too, with the Illini coming off a 10-win campaign. With 19 starters back in '25 and finally some big-game winning experience under its belt, why would this team be measurably worse? Systematically, of the 145 teams over the L12 years that brought back at least six starters more than the prior season, only 47 got worse. The average improvement of the group that didn't drop off was a winning percentage bump of 21.1% (+2.9 wins) and ATS rise of 7.6%. I've seen some experts showing the Illini as a fringe CFP contender. That doesn't happen at 7-5.

TEXAS TECH OVER 8.5 WINS
Head coach Joey McGuire has the Texas Tech recruiting efforts headed in the right direction, with each of the last four seasons under his watch bettering the prior year. At this rate, the Red Raiders figure to be a top 20 rated team consistently in the coming years so long as McGuire stays around. He also has the experience back this year that should make his team a contender for a Big 12 title, and hence, a CFP berth. There are 21 of 22 starters back from last year's 8-5 team, including QB Behren Morton, now a senior. He led the Red Raiders to 37.6 PPG last season, over 10 PPG better than the prior year. With a full complement of starters back on defense, I would expect the mass improvement would come on that side of the ball this year. This would be one of my top picks to crash the CFP party this year.

BYU UNDER 6.5 WINS
So, even before the whole QB Jake Retzlaff situation unfolded this summer, BYU was still in a position to be fighting off this year-to-year transition system: There is a dangerous assumption made about teams bringing back a starting quarterback from what was an explosive unit to an otherwise relatively new offensive group. In fact, over the L12 seasons, there were 52 teams that scored 30+ PPG the prior season and returned the starting QB but four or fewer other starters. Of those, 37 have DECLINED by 3.3 wins per season on average (-20.2%) and by 5.7 PPG. The combined ATS winning percentage of the 37 teams was only 44.2%, clear play against teams. Now that Retzlaff has left the program, and with the timing and circumstances with which he had to, I think the Cougars could be in some trouble for '25. Only eight total starters are back. Things sort of went their way last year. I see the opposite coming this season.

Cade Klubnik

MARSHALL UNDER 5.5 WINS

I have written on several occasions since last December about how unfortunate the contract dispute between Marshall & former head coach Charles Huff was and what a shame it was that this program couldn't keep things together after a 10-win, Sun Belt title season in '24. Since, the Herd lost as much in the transfer portal as anyone, and new HC Tony Gibson has just four starters back to show from last year's strong team. In fact, there may not be another program this season that bears lesser resemblance to its '24 self. The '25 campaign starts as tough as it gets, with a trip to Georgia. Gibson also inherits a program that is struggling in the area of recruiting, a problem previously non-existent. If that weren't a big enough hurdle, the Herd were already in a spot of having to combat a transition angle stating that teams typically drop when off of seasons in which they won 66.7% or more of their games against the spread and have six or fewer offensive starters returning, plus are breaking in a new quarterback. The 41 teams that have fit that bill over the L12 seasons have dropped by an average of 16% outright (-2.5 wins), 19.6% ATS, and 5.1 PPG offensively. (The eight teams that added a new head coach plummeted by 27% & 4.0 wins per season, as Marshall does now).

PAULY HOWARD

BOISE STATE OVER 9.5 WINS -170

Boise State would have to lose two games as double-digit favorites in order for this bet to lose. Paul Stone has the Broncos favored by 10+ in 11 games and 18+ in six games. Road games against USF and Notre Dame will be Boise's toughest tests; the Irish are 16-point favorites on October 4th. UNLV is down this year and Boise gets the Rebels in Idaho. The bus should roll on. The +190 price for the Broncos to make the CFP isn't bad either.

OKLAHOMA OVER 7.5 WINS +140

Star quarterback John Mateer comes over from Washington State and the schedule breaks well for the Sooners. Phil Steele has this group as his biggest surprise team of the season, and Oklahoma will get Michigan, Ole Miss and LSU in Norman. Road games against Tennessee, Alabama and South Carolina won't be easy, but 8-4 should happen with the talent on this roster. Getting plus-money odds only makes it more enticing.

MITCH MOSS

CLEMSON TO WIN THE ACC (+110)

BetMGM had this number at the time of this writing. Other books, such as Circa Sports, had +105 earlier in the month of July. That number has since changed to -110. Westgate in Las Vegas is also at -110. I understand the notion that locking up a bet at +110 for several months isn't for everybody. However, bettors are plunking down cash on win totals in Major League Baseball in February or March for a season that doesn't end until October. I'm also using Clemson to win the league as a leg for cross-sport parlays. I'm using them along with the Buffalo Bills to win the AFC East as anchors to various parlays.

Professional sports bettor Paul Stone made this number higher than -110 when he was on VSiN in mid-July. I think there is a real chance the separation between Clemson and the rest of the conference plays out where +110 looks really good come the day of the conference title game. Per Bill Connelly at ESPN, Dabo Swinney's club has 80% of their production returning from 2024 — highest in the entire country. They trailed Texas in the CFB Playoff 31-24 with nearly 12 minutes to play in the game (eventually losing 38-24, but had a 1st & goal at the Texas five-yard line with almost nine minutes remaining). Heisman Trophy candidate Cade Klubnik threw for 336 yards and three touchdowns in that game. He should be sitting on a monstrous campaign in 2025. Expectations are high in Death Valley, and I'm buying in.

DRAFTKINGS SPECIAL

Boise State (+160) Most Regular Season Wins Amongst 2024 CFP Second Round Exits (Oregon, Georgia, Boise State, Arizona State)
Oregon -110
Georgia +150
Boise State +160
Arizona State +400

I love the creativity here. Boise State plays at Notre Dame on October 4th. DK currently has the Fighting Irish 16.5-point favorites in that game. The Broncos are projected to be massive favorites in every other one of their 11 regular season games. Paul Stone makes them double-digit chalk in all of them.

Oregon is nearly a touchdown dog at Penn State, at Iowa will be tricky, and rivalry games against USC and at Washington could certainly be tricky.

Georgia is currently favored by 7.5 in Knoxville on September 13th. The Bulldogs are -4 when they host Alabama two weeks later. UGA is also -7 on October 11th, -7.5 versus Florida on November 1st, and -2.5 hosting Texas on November 15th. Favored in every game certainly doesn't mean they'll go undefeated. They also host Ole Miss and close vs. Georgia Tech. That game was 44-42 Bulldogs in eight overtimes last year. Think about that schedule and compare it to the teams Boise State will play.

I expect Arizona State to impress again this season. But the Big 12 is super competitive, and the Sun Devils have to play at Mississippi State on September 6th. That is a revenge game for the Bulldogs. ASU also plays at Baylor, a team with high hopes, at Utah, versus Texas Tech, at Iowa State and at Colorado. Impressing me is one thing, but navigating this schedule to a 10-2, 11-1 or dare I say 12-0 record will blow me out of the water.

I write all of this to say there is most definitely a path for Boise State to win this market, meaning the +160 is worth a wager. This is also a very fun market to plunk down some money and watch it play out over the course of a full regular season.

**Dead heat rules apply which can spoil the party, but I have it as a decent scenario where Boise wins 11 games, and the other three teams win 10 or fewer.

IOWA OVER 7.5 WINS (+135) & MAKE THE PLAYOFFS (9-1)
I can't remember the last time I told myself that I had to watch a college football game involving the Iowa Hawkeyes. I'm sure there's an analogy to their offense in recent years somewhere, but I would quite literally do anything else with my time. That is until 2025. At least for the sake of these bets. I'm not making these bets because the team is returning a ton of production (56%, which is 63rd in the country), or because they killed it in the transfer portal overall (55th nationally at 247 sports). I'm doing it because I like the numbers, the program is consistently one of the best in the country on defense and special teams, and one of the transfers they landed should have a major impact on offense.

Mark Gronowski takes over at QB after leading South Dakota State to a pair of FCS national titles. He threw for 10,309 yards in his four years with the Jackrabbits. He projects as the most dynamic playmaker under center for this team in as long as I can remember. We've been asking the question for years: "What would Iowa look like if they actually had an offense?" The reason for that is because their defense and special teams are about as reliable as any units in college football, and have been for several years under head coach Kirk Ferentz. In fact, both units ranked inside Bill Connelly's top 5 of his SP+ numbers at ESPN last season. He projects the defense to be top 10 this year, with the special teams ranking in the top 12.

Playing in Ames will be tricky in Week 2. They also host Indiana, Penn State and Oregon. Road games are in Madison, Los Angeles vs. USC, and they close in Nebraska. Not the easiest schedule, but not the most daunting. I make it a decent chance for this team to be 6-0 going into the October 18th meeting with the Nittany Lions. That is, if Gronowski is as good as I'm hoping. We've seen this team throw a scare into many highly ranked teams at Kinnick Stadium over the years. I feel pretty confident in saying neither Penn State or Oregon will have cakewalks when they visit Iowa City this season.

WILL HILL

NEBRASKA OVER 7.5 WINS -140
Nebraska coach Matt Rhule did not have a successful stint when he tried his hand in the NFL, with the Carolina Panthers. However, while coaching college football, Rhule has a well-earned reputation as a program builder. At Temple, Rhule went from 2-10 in Year 1, to 6-6 in Year 2, with a leap to 10-4 in Year 3. He then went to Baylor where his program duplicated a similar trajectory, going from 1-11 in Year 1, to 7-6 in Year 2, with a jump to 11-3 in his third and final year. Well, following five and six win seasons his first two years at Nebraska, Rhule enters Year 3. This is the time Rhule's programs usually make the leap, and the schedule is conducive to doing just that. Yes, they play at Penn State, but they avoid Oregon and Ohio State, and have a favorable non-conference schedule that should allow them to stack some early wins as well. Expect another Year 3 jump from Rhule's 'Huskers.

MATT BROWN

GARRETT NUSSMEIER TO WIN HEISMAN TROPHY (9-1)
When it comes to Arch Manning, we are putting a lot of faith in the name on the back of a jersey and tiny sample size of collegiate games against Mississippi State and Louisiana-Monroe. I understand the pedigree. I know the star rating. But he wouldn't be the first 'can't miss' prospect to play really good, but not quite amazing.

Enter Nussmeier, who will face one of the toughest schedules in college football this season. He managed to throw for more than 4,000 yards last season despite having a pathetic run game. That, and most everything on the offensive side of the ball, should be better this season.

Further, everything will be there for him to grab the spotlight. An opener against title contender Clemson. Roadies at Ole Miss, Alabama, and one to end the season at Oklahoma. And what about a potential season-ending battle with Manning? The SEC Championship Game is December 6. Heisman ballots are due December 8. If Nuss can cut down on the interceptions this year, and the defense can come together to allow him a chance to win the big games, he will be right there at the end of the season.

JENSEN LEWIS

KANSAS STATE TO MAKE COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF (+430 AT FANDUEL)
Kansas State enters the 2025 campaign as a quietly formidable force in the revamped Big 12. The Wildcats return 15 starters from a 2024 squad that weathered injuries and still made noise. Most notably, dynamic sophomore QB Avery Johnson (2,600+ total yards, 18 TDs) leads an offense that ranked top 20 in rushing. He's protected by an experienced offensive line returning four starters — though health remains a watch point, especially with recent updates on George Fitzpatrick, who is progressing well after a medical issue.

The loss of RB DJ Giddens to the NFL is offset by Dylan Edwards (Colorado transfer), who brings speed and versatility to the backfield. Defensively, Kansas State benefits from improved health, where Asa Newsom and Colby McCalister return. However, the Wildcats will need to generate more pass rush after recording just 25 sacks in 2024.

Kicking off the season with a marquee opener in Ireland against Iowa State, an opening win in Dublin could spark a favorable stretch that sets the stage for a potential late-season showdown with Utah — one that can determine the top Big 12 regular season spot. With a fast start and the advantage of playing at a tough Bill Snyder Family Stadium, Kansas State is well-positioned for at least a 10-2 finish and a likely Big 12 title game berth, putting them firmly in the College Football Playoff hunt.

WES REYNOLDS

ARMY UNDER 7.5 WINS (-120 AT DRAFTKINGS)

Army enters 2025 off its winningest season in program history (12-2) and its best season since 2018. However, they are attempting to duplicate the season without AAC Offensive Player of the Year QB Bryson Daily and a 1,000-yard rusher Kanye Udoh who transferred to Arizona State. Furthermore, Army's OL coach Matt Drinkall is now at Central Michigan and the unit that helped lead the nation in rushing (300.5 YPG) last season has to be rebuilt. The Black Knights defense is still solid and was eighth nationally in total defense (297.9 YPG), but much of that is predicated on Army being able to control the time of possession with its triple option. That will prove to be difficult especially without Daily and Udoh.

Moreover, Army's schedule provides a more difficult start than last season, having to visit the "Little Apple" to face Kansas State. Plus, they have conference road games at Tulane and at UTSA, who are both projected in the top four of nearly every AAC preseason poll. In addition, they have the Commander-In-Chief's trophy games with a road trip to Air Force, who should be somewhat back off a rebuilding year last season, and an improved Navy club in its second season in Drew Cronic's newish Wing-T-esque offense with perhaps the next great Midshipmen QB in Blake Horvath.

PENN STATE QB DREW ALLAR TO WIN HEISMAN TROPHY (18-1 AT BETMGM)

Allar certainly did not finish last season leaving a good impression. In Penn State's 27-24 loss to Notre Dame in the CFP Semifinal at the Orange Bowl, Allar went just 12 of 23 for 135 yards with a costly interception with 33 seconds left in the game. That mistake set up Notre Dame with a game-winning field goal attempt and ended Penn State's season.

However, he has a much better receiving corps around him this year, even with the loss of TE Tyler Warren (1st round - Indianapolis Colts) and arguably the best backfield in the nation with Nicholas Singleton and Kaytron Allen returning. Furthermore, four starters on the offensive line are back.

Coordinator changes have been all too commonplace in Happy Valley during James Franklin's tenure. Allar finally has some continuity with the offensive coordinator as Andy Kotelnicki returns. During the first season, Kotelnicki was not able to incorporate as much of the motion and deception he ran with such success at Kansas. Now he has a better receiver room with transfers Kyron Hudson (USC), Trebor Pena (Syracuse), and Devonte Ross (Troy) that can generate more explosive plays which will benefit Allar.

This will be the 40th anniversary of Penn State's last national title. The Nittany Lions have the experience and the talent to break through this season and at least look like a probable playoff team, which means Allar is a likely top contender for the Heisman throughout the season.

DUSTIN SWEDELSON

OREGON QB DANTE MOORE TO WIN HEISMAN TROPHY (25-1)

Six of the last eight Heisman Trophy Winners have been transfers. All of those transfer players were at least in their second season with their new program. I'll also add that six of the last 10 Heisman finalists in 2023 and 2024 were all transfers. What does all of that mean? It means that players on the move keep finding new situations to thrive in after developing at a previous stop. And when they have a chance to come back to the same system, they get even better.

Enter Moore. He's a former five-star prospect who played nine games at UCLA as a freshman in 2023. Oregon thought so much of him that in today's NIL world, they paid him whatever it took to sit a year behind Dillon Gabriel last season. Now he takes over this Will Stein-led Ducks offense that got Bo Nix selected in the first round of the NFL Draft and Gabriel taken in the fourth. Neither of those QBs were expected to go that high before ending up in Eugene. It's now Moore's time to shine after spending a year learning this system.

Drew Allar

LSU OVER 8.5 WINS (-140), MAKE PLAYOFF (+125), WIN SEC (+700), NATIONAL TITLE (18-1)

Texas, Georgia and Alabama all have transitions at QB in 2025 while LSU has the most stable situation under center with Garrett Nussmeier returning. Pressure is on for Brian Kelly this year as the last three LSU coaches have all won national championships by their fourth seasons. Kelly clearly knows the message and LSU has gone all in on this season finishing with the top Transfer Portal Recruiting Class.

Nussmeier, who guided the nation's seventh best pass attack a year ago gets a couple new toys to throw to in Kentucky transfer Barion Brown and Oklahoma transfer Nic Anderson. Plus Aaron Anderson returns after 61 catches for 884 yards and five touchdowns in 2024. More notably, this defense looks completely revamped. First, star Harold Perkins is healthy and opted to stay instead of going to the NFL. Plus, they added big time transfers to get after QBs in Jack Pyburn from Florida and Patrick Payton from FSU. In a year where the teams above them in the betting odds all have new QBs and have lost a lot in the draft the last couple seasons, give me a loaded LSU squad to thrive in 2025.

TEMPLE OVER 3.5 WINS (+105)

KC Keeler is a program builder. He started at Division III Rowan then went to Delaware where he won a national championship before eventually winning another at Sam Houston State and guiding their transition to FBS. Keeler is Curt Cignetti without the soundbites. He just wins everywhere he goes. Now he takes over one of the most impossible tasks, winning at Temple. Based on his history, he is built for the task. He brought in former Montana State OC Tyler Walker to run the offense after helping guide one of FCS' best offenses the last few years to deep playoff runs. QB Evan Simon returns but former Idaho/Oregon State QB Gevani McCoy could steal the job. Keeler also brought RB Jay Ducker with him from Sam Houston State after averaging 4.7 yards per attempt last season. They're favored over UMass in Week 1. They will beat Howard in Week 2. We then need two more wins which should happen against the likes of UTSA, Navy, Charlotte, Tulsa, ECU and Army. I'll buy low on a guy with the track record of Keeler.

INDIANA OVER 8.5 WINS (+115)

When Curt Cignetti said to Google him because he wins he didn't just mean for one season. This guy has consistently won going back to IUP to Elon to James Madison with a 130-37 record. Now that his system and standard have been implemented for a season, he doesn't have to start from the ground up like last year. After finishing 2nd in scoring offense a year ago, they could potentially be better this year with new QB Fernando Mendoza coming over from Cal. He has a big arm, makes big plays and thrives in big moments and is coming off a 3,000 passing yard season behind a bad front. Indiana fortified the offensive line with transfers from Notre Dame and Colorado while returning three starters there. The defense returns their heartbeat in pass rusher Mikail Kamara who led FBS with 68 pressures in 2024. Cignetti injected 23 transfers into the program. This is our new normal in college football and Cignetti has shown he knows how to navigate it.

JOHN MCKECHNIE

PENN STATE TO WIN THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP (+850 AT FANDUEL)

Penn State has what most of the other CFP favorites lack: Continuity. The Nittany Lions have a third-year starter at quarterback and the best backfield in college football coming back. They lost a lot in the receiving corps but when you consider their receivers had zero catches in the semifinal loss to Notre Dame, maybe that's not a bad thing. It seems unlikely that James Franklin will ever beat Ohio State, though one loss wouldn't sink Penn State's odds at making the CFP and with a good draw once again. This bet is about buying into the experienced returning talent up and down the roster being on par with the other big boys and Franklin and Co. finally getting over the hump.

OREGON TO MISS THE COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF (+176 AT FANDUEL)

I wish the odds were a little better here but what can you do? This is a big year for Oregon with big question marks at key spots. The Ducks will have to break in a new quarterback after years of getting experienced play at that position from Bo Nix and Dillon Gabriel. Those two both rank in the top 10 in CFB history in pass attempts. That's a lot of seasoned QB play they've enjoyed in Eugene since Dan Lanning took over.

Enter Dante Moore, who was a big-time prospect coming out of high school and struggled across nine games at UCLA before transferring to Eugene last fall. Was the year sitting behind Gabriel enough to get him ready to take over a program with national championship aspirations? I'm not so sure. Plus, they lose a ton in the receiving corps and the offensive line. Four total returning starters is concerning.

Yes, Oregon ducks Ohio State and Michigan, but games against Penn State, Iowa, USC and Washington are potential pitfalls.

HOUSTON OVER 6.5 WINS (+120 AT DRAFTKINGS)

There are a few things drawing me to this. For one, the schedule is pretty cushy. Non-con has Stephen F. Austin, Rice, and Oregon State. Admittedly, going to Corvallis could be a little tricky, though. The Big 12 slate isn't too brutal; Houston misses Kansas State and Utah. If Conner Weigman can tap into the things that made him a five-star recruit coming out of high school, Houston could be on the upswing in a big way. Adding on, Willie Fritz is an accomplished coach who has squeezed seven wins out of lesser teams. The only concern is that the race is on to get there before the final two weeks of the season, when Houston plays TCU and Baylor in back-to-back games.

DEVON DAMPIER TO WIN HEISMAN TROPHY (80-1 AT CAESARS)

This is a longshot, of course, but this year's crop of favorites leaves a lot to be desired especially for the prices. With that, looking a little further down the board makes sense. Arch Manning at around 5-1 is not a bet I'd want to make right now when I could potentially get back in on that at a better number if Texas loses at Ohio State in the opener.

Dampier makes the leap to a power program after breaking out last season at New Mexico and establishing himself as one of the best rushing quarterbacks in the country (1,166 yards, 19 rushing touchdowns). I'm buying a Utah bounceback, generally, and Dampier will be the driving force behind it. It doesn't hurt that Utah brought in his offensive coordinator from NM to help smooth the transition to the Big 12.

I see big-time numbers incoming from Dampier in a winnable, wide-open conference. If the field falls flat, especially at the top of the board, it could be another great year to target a longshot.

SEAN GREEN

OKLAHOMA STATE TO WIN THE BIG 12 (60-1)

If you look at the winners my fellow VSIN colleagues selected for the Big 12, you can see there isn't much of a consensus. I think Kansas is primed for a great season in their new stadium, but I'm also taking a shot on Oklahoma State here at this crazy high price in a wide open conference. HC Mike Gundy is 169-88 at Oklahoma State and that includes the 3-9 from last year, his worst season of his career. Gundy agreed to a $1 million reduction in salary coming off a year where he didn't win a conference game. Now Google a photo of Gundy and tell yourself you want to face off with him when he's backed into a corner. I love an Oklahoma State team with zero expectations and revenge on the mind.

SAN JOSE STATE TO WIN THE MOUNTAIN WEST (+750)

The optimism for San Jose starts with their QB Walker Eget, who they started midway through last season and comes in with a full offseason. They bring back four of their five OL and HC Ken Niumatalolo believes both OL and DL have vastly improved. The Spartans schedule is also a great reason to ride them as they avoid the three-best teams from last year in the conference. Plus they face six first-year head coaches, which is a great advantage for experienced HC Niumatalolo.

ADAM BURKE

LIBERTY TO WIN CONFERENCE USA (+125)

Some of us got burned by Liberty last season, but it never felt right from the beginning for Jamey Chadwell and the team. Kaidon Salter was a great player to inherit, but maybe not the best fit for Chadwell's motion-heavy offense that consists of getting the ball out in space. Grayson McCall was the right guy for it and Coastal Carolina was not only great while Chadwell was there, but not great after he left.

Ethan Vasko transfers in from Coastal Carolina and he was recruited to run the Chadwell offense, so this won't be as run-heavy of a group as it was last season or the season prior. I do believe that Chadwell has more of the personnel he wants here now and that should help the Flames reach their lofty expectations.

My power ratings show Liberty four points better than anybody else (Western Kentucky) and 7.5 points better on a neutral against anybody that they do face in regular season conference play. They can only get the Hilltoppers in December and I can decide what to do at that point, but Liberty is -5.5 or higher in every C-USA regular season game for me.

WESTERN MICHIGAN OVER 5.5 WINS (+130)

At time of publication, we're getting a really nice price on Western Michigan reaching bowl eligibility. Lance Taylor has done a really good job in Kalamazoo, especially on the offensive side. Now in Year 3, Taylor has improved this offense by nearly 10 PPG over his two seasons and the defense should make some strides with new DC Chris O'Leary, who was in the NFL last year and was an assistant in Notre Dame prior to that.

Brady Jones has a great chance to be an upgrade over Hayden Wolff and the running back room looks stronger thanks to some portal shopping. He threw for nearly 4,500 yards in JUCO last season and Wolff, who had decent numbers, only had an 18/8 TD/INT ratio. This should be a more explosive offense with a second-year OC in Walt Bell and it sure seems to me like Taylor is closer to having the roster he wants. The schedule is why we're getting plus money here, but I like this team.

STORMY BUONANTONY

UTAH OVER 7.5 WINS (-125) & TO WIN THE BIG 12 (+600)

Please cue Michael Corleone in The Godfather Part III: "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in."

I was all-in on the Utah hype train last season and they did me so dirty with yet another year of the "will he or won't he play" Cam Rising experience. We saw four different QBs start games for the Utes and the lack of offense ultimately produced what was their first losing season since 2013. Even though head coach Kyle Whittingham had been contemplating retirement in recent years, he came back saying he "couldn't stomach going out with that season, as frustrating as it was and is" and that it was "not going to be the final act of [his] deal."

Well, Rising is officially retired and a new (somewhat) under-the-radar QB1 has entered the chat. Dual-threat New Mexico TR Devin Dampier – as well as his OC with the Lobos Jason Beck – will operate the offense in Salt Lake City. While he does need work to develop as a passer, he is electric with his legs. Last season at UNM, he rushed for more than 1,150 yds, scored 19 TDs and boasted a 7.5 yards per carry average. He now, by the way, will put those skills to use behind a top tier OL.

I will also always trust a Whittingham-Morgan Scalley defense. Even with last year's struggles to close out games, they were a top-15 unit in the country in defensive EPA per play and I expect that side of the ball to do their part yet again.

Schedule-wise, it's not easy, but they do get all the top teams in the Big 12 coming to Rice-Eccles Stadium (Kansas State, Arizona State and Texas Tech). I remember writing it in my preview last year, but it bears repeating — RES is one of the most underrated places to play in college football and is shockingly loud.

I thought I was done on the Utes, but at O/U 7.5 wins and a nice price to win a league title, I had to dive back in.

Lander Barton

IOWA OVER 7.5 WINS (+135)

Aside from the Covid-shortened season in 2020, the Iowa Hawkeyes have won at least eight games per season since 2015 and I think they do it again to cash a nice plus-money ticket for us.

There are a few things you can always count on when it comes to Iowa football: They're physical, stout in the trenches, have elite defense and special teams…and have an unwatchable offense.

Iowa offensively in each of the last four years has ranked outside of the top 100 in EPA per play, and since 2022, the Hawkeyes rank 128th in passing yards and 130th in passing touchdowns. As a whole they actually took a huge step forward last season with new OC Tim Lester, yet they were still 73rd in total offense.

This season, they may actually have someone who can change that whole "unwatchable" thing. Expectations are sky high for Mark Gronowski, a former star in the FCS ranks, having won a Walter Payton Award (essentially the FCS Heisman) and a pair of national titles with South Dakota State. He's a proven winner, someone who won't beat himself and more importantly someone who should actually move the ball for an Iowa offense that's desperately needed it. Star RB Kaleb Johnson is off to the NFL (Steelers) and replacing him will be a challenge, but Gronowski can run a bit himself and will have plenty of support behind what's projected as one of the best offensive lines in the country. I've also heard from a handful of people around the program that there's a chance this is the deepest WR corps Iowa has had in a while.

The schedule isn't easy by any means with Penn State, Oregon and Indiana all on deck. That said, all three of those games are at home and they do avoid Ohio State in Big Ten play. At Iowa State in non-con Week 2 is big, and there's a few other 50-50 games I'll need to cash this ticket. But I very clearly see seven wins and if this offense can actually produce like I think it can, they'll give us eight or more.

WISCONSIN UNDER 5.5 WINS (-150)

"SHEESH" - That might be what you're thinking about the price for this bet, but it was also what Wisconsin DB Ricardo Hallman said to me when I asked him about the Badgers schedule this season. Now, of course, he went on to say all the right things about how that's what you sign up for in the Big Ten and how much this group has changed for the better from last year to now…but his initial reaction spoke volumes.

If you haven't taken a look at what the Badgers are facing this season, please allow me to lay it out for you: Road games at Alabama, Michigan, Oregon, Indiana and their rivalry game at Minnesota. But don't worry, at least they get to play Ohio State at home! Woof. Adding insult to injury, they face Alabama, Michigan, Iowa, Ohio State and Oregon all in a seven-week span before the Badgers have even gotten to November.

It's the hardest schedule in the country and a tough pill for a Wisconsin team that missed bowl eligibility last year for the first time since 2001. This team could actually be much improved from the group that won just five games last year, but I genuinely feel like the opponents this team will have to face on a weekly basis may derail any of that offseason hope and good will.

BOISE STATE TO MAKE THE CFP (+200)

Sadly, we're not getting anywhere near the 6-1 we cashed from this pick in last season's guide, but I still feel at +200 this is a worthwhile bet to go back to the well on.

Despite star RB Ashton Jeanty being off to Raiders camp, the Broncos are still in great position to win a third straight Mountain West title (-125, which I've also bet) and find themselves back in the playoff.

They have the most depth by far in the league coming back with 14 returning starters. Among those returners is Preseason MW POY Maddux Madsen and almost the entire two-deep front protecting him. I like the WR room and while it will be more by-committee at RB, there's plenty of belief in RS FR Sire Gaines and Fresno State TR Malik Sherrod to anchor the ground game.

Defensively, the Broncos elite pass rush from a year ago shouldn't skip a beat in 2025 with lead sack-getter Jayden Virgin-Morgan and Co. back. Even the secondary, which was a weakness in pass coverage last year, should be improved.

They also have a head coach in Spencer Danielson who is beloved by his players, and a pretty favorable schedule that sets up for at least 10 wins in my mind.

Now sure, you do have to keep in mind the performance of the other G5 teams vying for that fifth conference champion automatic bid — but it's worth noting Boise State is the highest ranked G5 team in ESPN's SP+ to open the season and, barring a completely embarrassing performance at Notre Dame, I could see the committee (which we have to remember is human) giving the Broncos some benefit of the doubt for what they did last year.

JONATHAN VON TOBEL

UTAH TO WIN BIG 12 (+600)

Utah has been desperately searching for decent quarterback play since Cam Rising was injured during the 2023 season. The Utes finally have that in New Mexico transfer Devon Dampier. Kyle Whittingham also has an experienced group coming back. Ten starters return on offense – outside of Dampier, the Big 12 Newcomer of the Year – and seven are back on defense. The schedule is favorable as well. Utah does not have any monster in non-conference, and the most challenging conference foes – Texas Tech, Arizona State and Kansas State – make the trip to Rice-Eccles.

DEVON DAMPIER TO WIN HEISMAN TROPHY (60-1)

Dampier is an electric dual-threat quarterback that can put up some insane numbers. Last season in Albuquerque he accounted for 31 touchdowns (12 passing, 19 rushing) and 3,945 total yards. His 39 rushes of 10+ yards were fifth-most in the country and he was tied for the most missed tackles forced, according to PFF. Dampier can be even better with more talent around him, and that is exactly what he has at Utah. If the Utes can conquer the Big 12 it will be on Dampier's shoulders and that will make him a legitimate Heisman candidate.

PENN STATE TO WIN NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP (+700)

James Franklin is 4-20 against opponents ranked 10th or higher in the AP poll. He is 1-14 against AP top-5 teams and his last win against those foes came in 2016 against Ohio State. Franklin is also 0-5 against opponents ranked in the top five of the CFP rankings. It's all terrible. But this roster is absolutely loaded. It is without a doubt, the best team Franklin has had in his time with the program. This is a roster that would likely be considered to be the favorite if it was a program such as Ohio State or Texas. The Nittany Lions do face the Buckeyes on the road, but host Oregon and avoid Michigan on the schedule. This team has everything it needs to win the whole thing.

AIR FORCE TO MAKE MOUNTAIN WEST CHAMPIONSHIP (+650)

Air Force had a poor season in totality last year, but the end was extremely strong. Over the last five games the Falcons went 4-1 SU/5-0 ATS and their offensive output improved to 302 yards and 29.3 points per game and 4.6 yards per rush. Eight starters are back on offense and this group is set up for a strong bounce back season. They play no power opponents this year. The Mountain West as a whole is down as well, which gives Air Force a chance to upend opponents like UNLV and Colorado State, both of which they play on the road. This team should be greatly improved and I don't believe it is being factored enough in the market.

INEXACT SCIENCE

CRUNCHING THE 2025 HOME-FIELD ADVANTAGE

BY ADAM BURKE

In last year's VSiN College Football Guide, I opened my home-field advantage article by acknowledging that neither you nor I know what it is actually worth. There are so many variables that can raise or lower the value of playing in front of hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, or more than one hundred thousand fans.

Rivalry games seem to make it matter just a little more or those big matchups under the lights. Wouldn't an ESPN game on a Tuesday night for the Sun Belt factor HFA in more than a random Saturday game against a FCS opponent? Wouldn't Penn State fans treat a White-Out differently than a sleepy Noon kickoff in September against a MAC school? HFA throughout the year can also vary if a team is really overperforming relative to expectations and the students are showing out or if a team stinks and the students have better things to do.

Sometimes you have a basketball school, where students are really engaged until November, when they'd rather spend their Saturdays pregaming for an indoor event. Weather can impact crowds. Holidays. School breaks. Market size. All sorts of things.

In other words, painting with a broad brush is really simplistic.

That being said, we have to have some value in mind for home-field advantage, right? Having a baseline and manipulating it from that point for the situation, matchup, weather, or any other factor is a good start. Last season, I went from analyzing a five-year sample of home performance to analyzing a three-year sample. COVID was one of the reasons behind my rationale, something that would still impact a five-year sample.

The larger reason is that college football teams look dramatically different from year to year. At larger programs, a group of guys together for three seasons is possible. At smaller schools, it is highly unlikely. Nevertheless, some measure of sample size feels like a requirement, so I kept it at three seasons.

Your view may vary and your standard HFA may very well be more than two points. Some people I respect still use 3. Others are down to 1.5 or 1, or even zero, depending on the team and how they've performed at home.

For me, teams are placed into "buckets" and ones that meet certain thresholds either go above or below the standard-issue two points. For this season, there are 19 teams with my max HFA of 3.5 points, 18 teams with 3 points, 16 teams with 2.5 points, seven teams with 1.5 points, and nine teams with 1 point. That means more than half (69) of the FBS teams (136) qualify one way or another.

The home records are courtesy of Steve Makinen and his extensive database, so my thanks go out to our VSiN Analytics Guru.

Here are those teams for the 2025 season.

There were several surprises on this list for me, both in terms of who is on the list and who is not (hi, Akron!). These home-field advantage values work in tandem with my Power Ratings to help me put together a line early in the week to see if I can find some betting value on opening numbers or what the market has on Monday or Tuesday.

If I'm doing a good job, the market should move towards my line more often than not, but I also have to keep in mind that my HFA system may not be similar at all to what sportsbooks and market influencers have. This is just my process, plus I have to handicap the qualitative factors mentioned above, like the magnitude of the game and other elements.

Back in the VSiN 2022 College Football Betting Guide, I called home-field advantage an "inexact science" and continue to use that expression because my feelings on it remain the same. But, if I have a process that is backed by something, I feel very confident in the "something is better than nothing" camp when it comes to such a difficult thing to pin down.

3.5 POINTS (SU + ATS HOME WIN% OF 70% OR HIGHER)

Alabama	Ohio State
Boise State	Oregon
Duke	Oregon State
Georgia Southern	Penn State
Jacksonville State	SMU
Kansas State	Tennessee
Louisville	Texas
LSU	UTSA
Missouri	Washington
Ohio	

3 POINTS (65-69.99%)

Delaware	Oklahoma
Georgia	Rice
Iowa	TCU
James Madison	Texas Tech
Liberty	Toledo
Marshall	Troy
Michigan	USC
Mississippi	Utah
Notre Dame	Washington State

2.5 POINTS (60-64.99%)

Army	South Carolina
Ball State	Syracuse
Connecticut	Tulane
Clemson	UAB
Indiana	UNLV
Kansas	Western Kentucky
Memphis	
Miami (OH)	*Note: Any team between
New Mexico State	40-59.99% has a standard
San Jose State	HFA of 2 points.*

1.5 POINTS (35.01-39.99%)

Cincinnati	Sam Houston State
Kennesaw State	South Florida
Northwestern	Vanderbilt
Old Dominion	

1 POINT (35% OR LOWER)

Charlotte	Northern Illinois
Georgia State	Purdue
Kent State	Stanford
Massachusetts	Tulsa
Nevada	

Colorado two-way superstar Travis Hunter brought the Heisman Trophy to Boulder last season. As a receiver, Hunter had 96 catches for 1,258 yards and 15 touchdowns. As a corner, he totaled 35 tackles and had 11 passes defended with four interceptions. Hunter also had a PFF grade of 90.3 in coverage, which was tied for the third-highest mark in the nation.

In many ways, Hunter blew up everything we knew about the Heisman Trophy. Dating back to 2000, only five non-quarterbacks have won this award. All of those guys played for teams that won at least 10 games; Colorado only won nine. Hunter was also the first defensive player to win since cornerback Charles Woodson did it with Michigan in 1997.

This season, things should return to normalcy. Nine of the top 10 players listed on the DraftKings Sportsbook oddsboard are quarterbacks, and there hasn't been much buzz about players that will be contributing on both sides of the ball. Ohio State head coach Ryan Day has mentioned it's a possibility for safety Caleb Downs, and Utah head coach Kyle Whittingham is interested in seeing if corner Smith Snowden can contribute as a slot receiver. But I don't think anybody will be relied on as much as Hunter was, and I don't see anybody delivering quite like that.

Taking all of that into consideration, your money should really be on the quarterbacks in 2025. And while I'm excited to see Texas' Arch Manning, the betting favorite in this market, with the keys to Steve Sarkisian's offense, I'm not even considering him. That said, there is one chalkier option that's worth a look, and I'm also eyeing three players a little further down the board.

GARRETT NUSSMEIER
LSU (+900)

Nussmeier threw for 4,052 yards with 29 touchdowns in his first year as the starter for LSU. Only four players in college football threw for more yards, and there's no reason Nussmeier can't turn things up a notch in 2025.

With another year of experience under his belt, Nussmeier should be able to cut down on the 12 picks he threw last season. Though that shouldn't come at the expense of his numbers. The Tigers threw the ball 59.21% of the time last year, which was the eighth-highest mark in the nation. LSU is going to air it out as often as anyone in 2025, as Nussmeier can make every throw in the book, and he'll be distributing to an elite group of receivers.

This offense isn't all that different from the one Jayden Daniels won a Heisman Trophy with in 2023. Of course, Nussmeier doesn't have Daniels' running ability, but he might not need it. With his ability to throw, just racking up numbers and helping LSU reach double-digit wins during the regular season should be enough. The latter won't be easy with the Tigers having a difficult schedule, but you can't rule it out. LSU used the transfer portal to fill most of its holes on defense. If defensive coordinator Blake Baker can make the pieces fit, there's a real possibility this will be the best team in the country.

MARCEL REED
TEXAS A&M (50-1)

John Mateer is going to be a popular Heisman pick, as everybody loves grabbing dangerous dual-threat quarterbacks — especially when they play for one of the biggest brands in college football. However, while Mateer is definitely an intriguing pick, I'd rather double the potential payout and take a shot on Reed.

Last season, Reed threw for 1,864 yards with 15 touchdowns and six picks, and he added another 547 yards and seven scores on the ground. Reed is an accurate passer, and he's flat-out electric when he looks to run. Now, Reed is set to play

behind an offensive line that could win the Joe Moore Award. The Aggies also added a star wide receiver in NC State transfer Kevin Concepcion.

With more familiarity in offensive coordinator Collin Klein's system, plus a much better group of weapons around him, Reed should take a massive leap in 2025. That leap could also mean a similar jump for Texas A&M, which should have one of the best defenses in the nation. So, don't rule out Reed having the stats and team success you need to have a chance at this.

JAYDEN MAIAVA
USC (70-1)

In last year's guide, I suggested taking Miller Moss and Maiava to win the Heisman Trophy, as Lincoln Riley's offense has produced three winners: Baker Mayfield, Kyler Murray and Caleb Williams. Unfortunately, that strategy didn't end up working out too well. Moss ended up winning the job, but he had a rough go at things behind a shaky offensive line and USC underperformed in close games. Eventually, Riley benched Moss for Maiava, who did some good things down the stretch.

Maiava ended the 2024 season by throwing for 295 yards with four touchdowns and three picks in a win over Texas A&M in the Las Vegas Bowl. That performance painted a pretty good picture of who Maiava is as a quarterback. The former UNLV star has a world of talent, but he's a little mistake-prone.

If Maiava can clean things up just a little, there's a chance he'll put up some outrageous numbers this season. USC's offensive line should be a little better and the Trojans have plenty of talent at wideout in Ja'Kobi Lane and Makai Lemon. Also, while road games against Notre Dame and Oregon could spell trouble, they'll also give Maiava two chances to make a case for himself with a massive audience.

Simply put, this system is as quarter-friendly as any, and Maiava has the arm and legs to become the next Riley success story. He just has to stay out of his own way — and beat out true freshman Husan Longstreet for the job.

THOMAS CASTELLANOS
FLORIDA STATE (120-1)

Castellanos threw for 1,366 yards with 18 touchdowns and only five interceptions for Boston College last year. He also completed 61.5% of his passes and cut down on his turnovers, showing growth as a passer in comparison to his 2023 season. That's big looking forward to 2025, as we know he's a dynamic runner; Castellanos rushed for 1,113 yards and 13 scores in 2023.

Castellanos is now playing for a much better team, in a much better offense. Gus Malzahn, previously the head coach at UCF, is bringing his fast-paced system to Tallahassee, where the offensive line is expected to be much better. There will also be a lot of weapons for Castellanos to work with, including former Tennessee wide receiver Squirrel White — plus a couple of awesome tight ends.

It's more realistic than people think for Florida State to go from worst to first in the ACC. Mike Norvell has proven to be one of the best coaches in the nation, and he was relentless in filling needs in the transfer portal.

If the Seminoles do complete that type of turnaround, that will likely mean that Castellanos had a monster season. And let's not forget that Malzahn has coached a Heisman winner before. He was the offensive coordinator for Auburn when Cam Newton won it back in 2010.

WIN TOTAL BETS I'M MAKING NOW

BY STEVE MAKINEN

After reviewing the coaching changes, Stability Scores, transitional systems, recruiting rankings, and projecting the schedule using my power ratings, I've finalized my team season-win total bets that I will be making. At the conclusion of this piece are those wagers, with the odds available at DraftKings. You'll see that, based upon the recent success I've enjoyed, I've again opted for more Unders than Overs this season.

Before revealing my 2025 plays, I'd like to remind readers of my success using my preparation methods over the last three years, specifically in releasing my season win total wagers. In 2022, I went 14-5-1, including 9-1 on Unders. That success led me to expand my plays to 30 in 2023. Those 30 bets wound up going 16-13-1 and I was again 10-4-1 on Unders. Finally, last year at this time, I picked 22 teams, going 12-10 overall, including 7-5 on Unders. Therefore, my overall three-year record is now 42-28-2 for 60%, highlighted by 26-10-1 (72.2%) on Unders. It seems pretty clear to me that I have become much better at identifying teams that are due for struggles. Hopefully, that changes this year, as the ratio is 14 Overs, 15 Unders.

Now, for my 2025 college football season win total wagers.

PROJECTED OVER TEAMS

ALABAMA – OVER 9.5 WINS
In my opinion, there was a lot of pressure on head coach Kalen DeBoer last season in his first year running the Alabama program. He was taking over for a legend, and he had QB Jalen Milroe plus 12 other starters back from the 12-2 team of 2023. In other words, expectations were still very high. After a hot start, Milroe cooled terribly, and the offense went from scoring 41.7 PPG in the first six games to 27 PPG in the final seven contests, and that includes the 52-point outburst vs. FCS Mercer. Clearly, the talent remains in Tuscaloosa, and now, with the talented Ty Simpson taking over at QB, the expectations and pressure will be somewhat lessened this season. The schedule is favorable, with only one real spot where it looks like 'Bama will be a dog.

ARIZONA – OVER 4.5 WINS
Some of the teams that made big conference transitions last year didn't fare quite as well as others with the new conditions. Arizona was one of those, but to be fair, the program was also working with a new head coach in Brent Brennan. In 2023, QB Noah Fifita was a star, leading the Wildcats to a 10-3 mark. In 2024, he struggled in the new system and conference. In his junior season, I expect him to rebound to frosh form, and with the Big 12 being projected as a wide-open conference once again, I wouldn't discount Arizona's chances at being a "surprise" team this fall. With 16 starters back for 2025 and wiping the slate clean from terrible turnover luck in 2024, this team is already on better footing. I expect them back in a bowl game in December.

ARKANSAS STATE – OVER 5.5 WINS
In head coach Butch Jones' first season in Jonesboro, his Arkansas State team was 2-10. Since then, they have gone 3-9, 6-7, and finally, 8-5 last year. They culminated last season with a solid underdog win over Bowling Green in the 68 Ventures Bowl as well. Now, with a season win prop of 5.5 at DK, we are supposed to believe that this upward momentum is completely gone? Why? Did the Red Wolves lose all their starters? Are they working with a new QB? Is their coaching staff brand new? The answers to all of those questions are no. Quarterback Jaylen Raynor returns as a junior, and several teams on their 2025 slate seem "unstable" to me. I have a hard time seeing this team not in a bowl game again.

AUBURN – OVER 7.5 WINS
Last year, I wrote a lot of nice things about why Auburn would be better in year two under Hugh Freeze. I said this without truly believing whether or not former QB Payton Thorne had the stones or the talent to excel in the SEC. As the Tigers move on from him to potential stud Jackson Arnold, a former big-time recruit who had highlight moments at Oklahoma, I think the program and Freeze are in a position to better utilize their talents this fall. Freeze has recruited well, with back-to-back recruit/transfer combined rankings in the top 8 nationally. There are 14 other starters returning. The opener at Baylor is a huge one, but I think the talent is in place for a much-improved 2025 at Auburn.

CHARLOTTE – OVER 2.5 WINS

It's very rare when I will back a team with a zero stability score to go over a season win prop. That said, Charlotte's win total is ridiculously low for a program that has not been ridiculously bad lately. The 49ers were actually 5-7 last year under former head coach Biff Poggi, and they scored 23.7 PPG, a 6.2-point improvement from 2023. There are five starters back for Poggi's replacement, Tim Albin, who I feel is a very strong hire for the program. Albin has plenty of Group of Five FBS experience, having served as Ohio's head man for the last four seasons, where he was 33-19. Albin also adds a former Power Four QB from North Carolina in junior Conner Harrell, who has three starts under his belt.

FLORIDA – OVER 7.5 WINS

This is the second straight season I am taking Florida over its season win total prop, as I love the direction in which fourth-year head coach Billy Napier is taking the program. The Swamp is electric again, Napier is close to recruiting at Urban Meyer standards again, and there are 15 starters back from last year's 8-5 team. One of those is, of course, star QB DJ Lagway. Yes, I realize the schedule is difficult; it always is at UF. However, the Gators have the talent, experience, and momentum to make things even more difficult for the teams playing them. This is a CFP contender if you ask me.

FLORIDA STATE – OVER 6.5 WINS

Can a 1-11 season be a "blip on the radar" for any program? We will find out for head coach Mike Norvell and Florida State, after he attempts to resuscitate the Seminoles following what was an abysmal 2024 campaign. He has 15 starters back from that team, which could be good or bad, I guess. However, if you read my recruiting rankings article about a month ago, you would have seen that FSU's recent recruiting talent places it third in the projected ACC standings. If you're worried about how a team that averaged just 15.4 PPG last season is going to get dramatically better, you can place your trust in transfer QB Thomas Castellanos out of Boston College, as he has been outwardly confident about his ability to lead his team back to the heights it reached in 2023. A 6.5-win prop after a 1-11 season should stand out to a savvy bettor. To me, it does. This team should be over .500 with the talent and coaching staff in place.

ILLINOIS – OVER 7.5 WINS

This is what I wrote about Illinois in my recent recruiting rankings piece: Fifth-year coach Bret Bielema brought in another solid Illinois recruiting class this spring, and it's clear that he has established a new standard in that area where the program did struggle previously. The results are showing on the field, too, with the Illini coming off a 10-win campaign. With 19 starters back in 2025 and finally some big-game winning experience under its belt, why would this team be measurably worse? Systematically, of the 145 teams over the last 12 years that brought back at least six starters more than the prior season, only 47 got worse. The average improvement of the group that didn't drop off was a winning percentage bump of 21.1% (+2.9 wins) and an ATS rise of 7.6%. I've seen some experts showing the Illini as a fringe CFP contender. That doesn't happen at 7-5.

MICHIGAN STATE – OVER 5.5 WINS

In my offseason analysis of the recent season, I have found that experienced teams have shown a penchant for bouncing back. Coming off seasons in which they lost at least five games by 20 points or more, teams with at least 13 starters back since 2013 have wiped the slate clean enough to improve by 1.7 wins per season. This represents a 13.1% improvement outright and a jump of 15.6% ATS. There have been 120 such teams over the last decade-plus, and only 21 have gotten worse. One of the biggest improvements in wins from one season to the next you'll find comes when nine or more offensive starters, including the quarterback, return from a team that won 33% or less of its games against the spread in the prior season. The average win increase is 13.5% SU and 24.5% ATS. These teams scored 5.4 PPG more as well and combined to go 52.1% ATS. Only nine of the 41 teams over the last 12 years got worse. If you're wondering why I post all of this now, it applies to Michigan State this season. The Spartans won five games last year in head coach Jonathan Smith's first season. Why would they not get even slightly better in year two with 15 starters back?

MISSISSIPPI STATE – OVER 3.5 WINS

I hate to use a system that shows how inferior a team was the prior season as a reason to think they'll be better this year, but as far as MSU is concerned, subpar teams that experience zero close wins in a season also tend to improve, particularly when they choose to stay the course. In fact, since 2013, there have been 70 teams that finished .500 or worse and had zero close wins of seven points or fewer in the prior season, then brought back their starting QB, at least 12 total starters, and their head coach. Of those, only six finished worse the next season. The average win bump was 2.7 per season, an 18.8% SU and 10% ATS surge. The SEC schedule is extremely tough, but being down on Arizona State a bit this year, I wouldn't discount the Bulldogs and their 16 returning starters going 4-0 out of the gate before even touching the SEC. This offense improved a lot last season under QB Blake Shapen and first-year head coach Jeff Lebby. Both are back, meaning I expect continued improvement.

PURDUE – OVER 2.5 WINS

In this day and age of lighter non-conference slates in preparation for Big Ten play, it's almost impossible to imagine a program like Purdue going 1-11 in a season. Especially considering the Boilermakers averaged 7.0 wins per season over the prior three years. When hitting rock bottom like this, it almost always makes sense to change coaches. Insert Barry Odom, who is making his third different head coaching stop and coming off a successful stint of reviving the UNLV program. The expectations are still rightfully low at Purdue despite the change to Odom this season. DraftKings has a win total set at 2.5, but there is a very good chance this team starts 2-0 with games versus Ball State and Southern Illinois to start the season. I'd be willing to take my chances that this team gets at least a win in conference play to surpass the total. This is not a perennial doormat-type program. Plus, in the "there's nowhere to go but up category," since 2013, there have been 63 teams that have won two or fewer games in a season while enduring a -0.8 or worse turnover ratio. Only 11 of those 63 teams did not improve, while 52 did. The average win improvement for the 52 teams was 3.2 per season. The SU win percentage upgrade was 24.5%, and the ATS improvement was a substantial 17.5%.

TEXAS TECH – OVER 8.5 WINS

Head coach Joey McGuire has the Texas Tech recruiting efforts headed in the right direction, with each of the last four seasons under his watch bettering the prior year. At this rate, the Red Raiders figure to be a top 20-rated team consistently in the coming years so long as McGuire stays around. He also has the experience back this year that should make his team a contender for a Big 12 title, and hence, a CFP berth. There are 21 of 22 starters back from last year's 8-5 team, including QB Behren Morton, now a senior. He led the Red Raiders to 37.6 PPG last season, over 10 PPG better than the prior year. With a full complement of starters back on defense, I would expect the mass improvement would come on that side of the ball this year. This would be one of my top picks to crash the CFP party this year.

USC – OVER 7.5 WINS

Year 1 in the Big Ten presented challenges for USC, and I believe the unfamiliarity with having to travel to places such as Michigan, Minnesota, and Maryland, all losses by the way, doomed what otherwise could have been a nice season in 2024. This season offers a reboot for head coach Lincoln Riley and Co. after what was a learning process. Of course, close losses can be a galvanizing factor for teams that stay the course. In fact, of the 39 teams over the last 12 seasons that suffered 5+ close losses of 7 points or less and brought back their head coach and at least half of their starters (11+), only one finished worse the next season. The average win improvement was 2.8 per season, representing a 20.4% jump. A 2.8-win bump would put the Trojans at 8.8, easily good enough to pass the 7.5-prop. QB Jayden Maiava is back at QB, and he had some very big moments last year in part-time duty. Plus, 15 other starters return. I think USC takes a step or two forward this fall.

VIRGINIA TECH – OVER 6.5 WINS

There were some lofty expectations for Virginia Tech last year as they brought back the most experience in the country following a revival 7-6 season in 2023. I took the bait, hook, line, and sinker in posting the Hokies to pass their win total. I'm doing it again, but for different

reasons, as I believe head coach Brent Pry and Co. won't be consumed by all the preseason love they got a year ago. That evaporated quickly in a season-opening OT loss to Vanderbilt, one of several tight games they wound up on the short end of. Well, close losses can be a galvanizing factor for teams that stay the course. In fact, of the 39 teams over the last 12 seasons that suffered 5+ close losses of 7 points or less and brought back their head coach and at least half of their starters (11+), only one finished worse the next season. The average win improvement was 2.8 per season, representing a 20.4% jump.

PROJECTED UNDER TEAMS

APPALACHIAN STATE – UNDER 5.5 WINS
Coming off its first sub-.500 season since 2013, Appalachian State welcomes in a new head coach in Dowell Loggains to try to recharge the program. With DraftKings setting the season win total at 5.5 after a 5-6 season, and considering that the Mountaineers, who have just seven starters back, hadn't won fewer than six games since 2013 prior to last year, it seems that this program, which has dominated the Sun Belt for the last decade, is in the midst of a downturn, the downward side of a "mountain," pardon the pun, one that peaked from 2015-21, a seven-year span in which the Mountaineers won 73 games. Any team with a stability score of zero gets at least my attention when it comes to Unders on season win total props. This one has a little higher total than others and is trending the wrong way.

ARIZONA STATE – UNDER 8.5 WINS
This may turn a few heads because ASU made such a nice CFP run last year after shocking the college football world en route to the Big 12 title, but I have this strange feeling that 2024 may have been a lightning-in-a-bottle moment for the Sun Devils. Unfortunately, even after all that success last season, head coach Kenny Dillingham brought in a recruiting class this year ranked just 60th, ASU's worst in 14 years. The recruiting standings projections for the Big 12 show the Sun Devils as a bottom-half team in the conference. This team also had a lot of turnover luck last season, and it can easily be argued that the teams that got the "luckiest" in the prior season were those that had the best turnover differentials combined with the smallest point differentials. It can also be predicted that these teams are due for a fall when "starting over." Historically, that is the case, as only seven of the last 35 teams to have a TO differential of +1.0 or better and PPG differential of +12.0 or less went on to improve their winning percentage the next season. The rest declined by 3.1 wins per season, for an average percentage drop of 23.2% outright and 13.8% ATS. Collectively, they were 43% ATS. Finally, while ASU does bring back a lot of starters, it loses its heart and soul of 2024 with RB Cam Skattebo off to the NFL. Sometimes, looks can be deceiving. I expect this Sun Devils team not to live up to expectations.

BYU – UNDER 6.5 WINS
So, even before the whole QB Jake Retzlaff situation unfolded this summer, BYU was still in a position to be fighting off this year-to-year transition system: There is a dangerous assumption made about teams bringing back a starting quarterback from what was an explosive unit to an otherwise relatively new offensive group. In fact, over the last 12 seasons, there were 52 teams that scored 30+ PPG the prior season and returned the starting QB but four or fewer other starters. Of those, 37 have declined by 3.3 wins per season on average (-20.2%) and by 5.7 PPG. The combined ATS winning percentage of the 37 teams was only 44.2%, clearly play-against teams. Now that Retzlaff has left the program, and with the timing and circumstances with which he had to, I think the Cougars could be in some trouble for 2025. Only eight total starters are back. Things sort of went their way last year. I see the opposite coming this season.

BUFFALO – UNDER 7.5 WINS
Former head coach Maurice Linguist recruited very well in his three years at Buffalo. His teams didn't win on the field, however. The Bulls are looking for the exact opposite after new head coach Pete Lembo's first two classes have cratered. After a 9-4 record in Lembo's first year, I would have expected recruiting improvement this spring. With the loss of QB CJ Ogbonna since last year, this program will face a difficult transition angle in place. There have been 42 teams over the last 12

seasons that started a new quarterback after a season in which they finished with a .500 or better record despite suffering three or more losses of 20 points or more. Only six of those 42 teams finished with a better record the following season, with an average drop of 14.3%, or 2.4 wins per season. They also dropped by 5.4% ATS, collectively going just 46.8% ATS. I think new QB Ta'Quan Roberson will eventually fare well at Buffalo, but the Bulls only outscored teams by 1.0 PPG despite their 8-4 regular season record. I believe that is called overachieving. This year, they go back a step.

FRESNO STATE – UNDER 6.5 WINS
New head coach Matt Entz lowered the bar on recruiting for Fresno State this spring, bringing in a class ranked 106th in the country. Only one class in the last 12 years has been worse for the Bulldogs. As a sign of what type of talent is now coming in, FSU's expected starting QB comes over from Temple, senior EJ Warner. In his two years starting for the Owls, they were 3-9 in back-to-back seasons. This program has produced prolific, top-level QBs at the position in recent years. That is the here and now. When long-time head coach Jeff Tedford was forced to step down with health concerns just prior to the 2024 season, he left behind a legacy of consistent if not prolific production from the offense. Only eight starters back in all. The season win prop is 6.5, with DK suggesting this team will be slightly better than last year's 6-6 regular season mark. I don't see it. Instability, lower-tier QB transferring in. I see the first season without a bowl bid in five years.

JACKSONVILLE STATE – UNDER 6.5 WINS
Former head coach Rich Rodriguez leaves this newer FBS program in great shape for replacement Charles Kelly, as very few programs that have transitioned lately to college football's highest level can match the success that the Gamecocks have enjoyed the last two years. That said, it is only natural to expect a drop off in 2025, as Kelly has only three starters back on each side of the ball and will be changing schemes dramatically from what Rodriguez ran. Those JSU teams have been known for their tough-to-stop, versatile offense run attacks over the last two seasons. The offense will change significantly under Kelly and new OC Clint Trickett (Marshall). That leads to instability in itself. There will be a lot different for this program in 2025. The win prop is 6.5. That is more optimistic than I feel.

MARSHALL – UNDER 5.5 WINS
I have written on several occasions since last December about how unfortunate the contract dispute between Marshall and former head coach Charles Huff was and what a shame it was that this program couldn't keep things together after a 10-win, Sun Belt title season in 2024. But the Herd lost as much in the transfer portal as anyone, and new head coach Tony Gibson has just four starters back to show from last year's strong team. In fact, there may not be another program this season that bears less resemblance to its 2024 self. The 2025 campaign starts as tough as it gets, with a trip to Georgia. Gibson also inherits a program that is struggling in the area of recruiting, a problem previously non-existent. If that weren't a big enough hurdle, the Herd were already in a spot of having to combat a transition angle stating that teams typically drop when off of seasons in which they won 66.7% or more of their games against the spread and have six or fewer offensive starters returning, plus are breaking in a new quarterback. The 41 teams that have fit that bill over the last 12 seasons have dropped by an average of 16% outright (-2.5 wins), 19.6% ATS, and 5.1 PPG offensively. (The eight teams that added a new head coach plummeted by 27% and 4.0 wins per season, as Marshall does now).

MASSACHUSETTS – UNDER 3.5 WINS
Mass instability is a crucial factor in looking for season win total Under wagers for me. UMass figures to fit that bill to a tee. There will be just seven starters back from last year's 2-10 team, which if you're an optimist, in some ways, could wind up being a good thing since eight wins in six seasons demand a house cleaning. If you think that moving to the MAC could help hasten the rebuilding efforts for new head coach Joe Harasymiak and the Minutemen, keep in mind that this program is just 8-56 over the last six seasons and already playing a light slate. They have only beaten 3.5 wins twice since 2011 (both 4-8 seasons), so the 3.5 number is too rich for my blood. Confidently, this will be one of my Under season win wagers.

MEMPHIS – UNDER 8.5 WINS
Sometimes things can look rosy on the outside, but if you dig under the hood a little bit, you can find cracks. Even the respected Phil Steele doesn't expect a drop in Memphis' prospects for 2025. Perhaps he doesn't analyze some of the same transitional systems that I do, because there are several red flags that arise around head coach Ryan Silverfield's team, despite the 11-2 record a year ago. First, there is a potential landmine system that has affected teams coming off a season in which they enjoyed a positive 1.0 or better turnover differential but are now starting fresh at quarterback. The 35 most recent teams that have fit this bill have dropped by 2.9 wins per season in the next campaign, representing a 20.7% plunge outright and 13.2% dip ATS. While transfer Brendon Lewis was a starter at Nevada, he wasn't exactly leading a high-level team. Second, it can easily be argued that the teams that got the "luckiest" in the prior season were those that had the best turnover differentials combined with the smallest point differentials. It can also be predicted that these teams are due for a fall when "starting over." Historically, that is the case, as only seven of the last 35 teams to have a TO differential of +1.0 or better and PPG differential of +12.0 or less went on to improve their winning percentage the next season. The rest declined by 3.1 wins per season, for an average percentage drop of 23.2% outright and 13.8% ATS. Collectively, they were 43% ATS. And finally, not being tested by close losses can be a warning signal for inexperienced teams on the verge of dropping. There have been 43 teams over the last 12 seasons that lost four games or fewer, none in close loss fashion (7 points or less), and brought back only 12 starters or fewer. Of these, only five teams won more games the next season, with the average win drop being 2.8 per season, a 20.4% SU slide accompanied by a 10.8% ATS drop. All of this, with just eight starters back, would suggest a 7-8 win ceiling for the Tigers.

NEW MEXICO – UNDER 3.5 WINS
It was a short stay for Bronco Mendenhall at New Mexico, unfortunate since he led the Lobos to a 5-7 record in 2024, the program's best mark since 2016. The Lobos will turn to Jason Eck, who has made six different stops at FCS schools over the last 15 years, and he will look to keep the momentum going from the one season under Mendenhall. However, it's never easy for a program when an abrupt, unexpected change like this occurs. New Mexico football was "back" last season after a miserable run of seven straight years winning four games or fewer. Now, with just seven starters back, the Lobos are again generally picked as the worst team in the MWC, and Eck will have his hands full. I don't have the stats handy, but I can't imagine programs that continually struggle and having three coaches in three years being a winning recipe.

OHIO – UNDER 7.5 WINS
Former head coach Tim Albin has left for the "greener pastures" at Charlotte. The new coach will be Brian Smith, who led the Bobcats to a sixth straight bowl game win in the interim role following Albin's departure in December. Smith had his hands in a lot of what was going on already in Athens, having served as assistant head coach and offensive coordinator since 2022, so this should be a relatively smooth transition. However, despite the modest changeover, the DK oddsmakers put Ohio's season win prop at 7.5, which would still be a 1.5-win drop from last year's MAC title season. Perhaps they know that there have been 19 teams over the last 12 seasons that have recorded 6+ blowout wins of 20 points or more in a season, then had to change head coaches for one reason or another. Only two of the 19 teams got better the next season, and collectively, they dropped by an average of 17.7%, or 2.7 wins per season, as well as 18.5% ATS. As a group, they were 47.4% ATS. Michigan qualified on this angle last year and dropped by seven wins! Plus, not being tested by close losses can be a warning signal for inexperienced teams on the verge of dropping. There have been 43 teams over the last 12 seasons that lost four games or fewer, none in close loss fashion (7 points or less), and brought back only 12 starters or fewer. Of these, only five teams won more games the next season, with the average win drop being 2.8 per season, a 20.4% SU slide accompanied by a 10.8% ATS drop. Ohio qualifies for some significant decline systems, loses a lot of experience, and has a new coach. That usually gets my vote for Under on a season win prop.

RICE – UNDER 3.5 WINS
Former Rice head coach Mike Bloomgren was in charge for seven full seasons despite not finishing with a winning record even a single time in that stretch. Perhaps a change was in order. The Owls now turn to Scott Abell, who gets a first FBS look. He runs an option offense, so expect a completely new look for Rice in 2025. With that in mind, this situation will represent one of the biggest changes in the country in terms of systems. To be frank, it's difficult to imagine a situation where it's successful, as only seven starters are back, and everyone is left to learn new football. When even teams like Army and Navy are discussing the possibility of abandoning their famous option attacks, this program chose to go in the opposite direction. Additionally, Abell's Davidson teams made the FCS playoffs three times but never achieved a better record than 8-3, and they finished 6-4 last year. To be perfectly honest, I'm not a fan of this transition. The AAC is tougher than most people realize. I'm going Under 3.5.

SAM HOUSTON STATE – UNDER 4.5 WINS
Living in the state of Wisconsin, I can tell you firsthand that there are not many fans of the Badgers who will speak highly of what Phil Longo and his Air Raid offense accomplished in his short stint there under head coach Luke Fickell. After being relieved of his duties, he was still able to land a head coaching spot for this season, taking over a Sam Houston State team that won 10 games a year ago under KC Keeler, who elected to take the job at Temple.

In truth, Longo's situation at SHSU is probably better than a lot of new head coaches are inheriting this season. He gets the team's starting QB back in senior Hunter Watson, and Longo believes he will be the answer for the Bearkats' version of the Air Raid. There are seven other starters back as well from a 10-win team. Even still, prognosticators still project this program as a bottom-third team in the weak Conference USA this season, and the win total is a meager 4.5. When in doubt, trust the experts behind the counter.

SYRACUSE – UNDER 5.5 WINS
Syracuse played some extremely exciting and nail-biting games en route to a 10-3 finish last year for first-year head coach Fran Brown. That said, close wins are often characterized as getting "lucky" over the course of a season. Teams that have a lot of them and then come back inexperienced are naturally expected to drop. Over the last 12 seasons, 69 teams brought back 14 starters or fewer and had a new QB from a team that was fortunate to get four or more close wins of seven points or fewer in the prior season. Only nine of these teams finished better the next season, with the average win drop being 2.6 per season, a 16.1% plunge. Now, even a 2.6 win drop would still have Syracuse at 6.4 wins off of last year's 9-3 regular season. You must, however, consider how much this team leaned on QB Kyle McCord last year. He threw 34 TDs and attempted 592 passes. The Orange actually passed 65.7% of their plays offensively. McCord is off to the NFL now, and Brown brings in Notre Dame transfer Steve Angeli, but with just eight starters back, matching last year's success seems quite unrealistic.

WASHINGTON STATE – UNDER 5.5 WINS
There has to be some real concern with Washington State football right now, as not only have the Cougars been left without a conference, but the impacts on recruiting have been felt with three straight poorly-rated classes. Departed head coach Jake Dickert clearly knew what he was doing in leaving. I love finding situations like this, as leaving Wazzu for a struggling Wake Forest program should certainly raise some eyebrows among savvy bettors. Unfortunately, the situation here has become one that probably only a first-time FBS head coach would be happy to take on. Having no pure conference affiliation is a difficult one to manage. It's unrealistic to think that top recruits will embrace Pullman, WA. Enter Jimmy Rogers, who comes to Wazzu after a very successful run at various positions at South Dakota State. He only gets eight starters back, and his program is carrying the negative momentum of a 52-35 Holiday Bowl loss to Syracuse, a game in which it was almost questionable as to whether the Cougars would have enough rostered to play. The schedule is no longer Pac-12 tough, but still, matching the lowered 5.5-win prop seems unlikely.

CHANGES AT THE TOP

GETTING TO KNOW THE 28 NEW COACHES

BY ADAM BURKE

The offseason college football carousel spins at a frenetic pace. Most of the attention has always been on the players, but the ease of transferring and college football free agency has made it so much easier to get clicks. The NIL and some of the wild numbers — both true and false — that get thrown around dominate the headlines.

But, it is also important to know which programs have new head coaches. Every program has new players and some holdovers, but not every program has a new leader. Coaching turnover is inevitable, as the hierarchy of college football head coaching jobs has just about everybody attempting to move up in the world.

Coaches also move in search of better facilities and bigger NIL budgets. We've also seen some college head coaches and coordinators go to the NFL to get away from the tasks of recruiting altogether. We've even had our first "tampering" lawsuit between Miami (FL) and Wisconsin this offseason, as the Badgers allege that the Hurricanes offered more money to Xavier Lucas while he was under contract with Wisconsin, thus committing tortious interference.

Last season, we had 30 new head coaches. This season, we have 28. Let's look at those individuals, their programs, and how things might change this season.

POWER FOUR NEW HEAD COACHES

ACC
Bill Belichick (North Carolina)
It has been a circus so far in Chapel Hill with Belichick's personal life dominating the headlines, but this is also a microcosm of what college football is now. Former VSiN host Michael Lombardi has reconnected with his good buddy as the GM of the Tar Heels program. The Hoodie's reputation most certainly precedes him with 333 wins and six Super Bowl titles. The Tar Heels always seem to have thrilling offensive pieces, but the defense has been hit or miss at best. With Belichick as one of the game's greatest defensive minds, that side of the ball should improve rapidly.

Frank Reich (Stanford)
This is arguably one of the most interesting coaching hires and one I feel nobody is really talking about. Like Belichick, Reich has never been a college football coach. But, the Maryland QB and 1985 third-round pick has been an offensive innovator at the NFL level and his coaching tree and list of quarterbacks are vast. Oddly enough, Reich was technically named the interim head coach by Stanford football GM Andrew Luck. Yes, that Andrew Luck. Stanford's lofty academic standards can be a tough hurdle to overcome, but this putrid offense is going to improve with Luck and Reich in-house.

Jake Dickert (Wake Forest)
A far less interesting hire, but an intriguing one nonetheless. Dickert had to navigate some choppy waters when Nick Rolovich and others were fired for refusing to follow the state of Washington's COVID vaccine mandate. Dickert was 23-20 with the Cougars and took over in Winston-Salem when Dave Clawson resigned. So he has big shoes to fill. Clawson led the Demon Deacons for over a decade. Now reunited with well-regarded DC Scottie Hazelton, Wake Forest should absolutely get stronger on that side of the ball, but we'll see if the offense follows suit.

BIG 12
Scott Frost (UCF)
We have a reunion in the Bounce House, as Frost returns to the job that he had before his failed tenure at his alma mater, Nebraska. Frost spent last year on Sean McVay's staff with the Rams and then left for Orlando, where he was the head coach in 2016-17 and led the Knights to a bowl game win over Auburn in the Peach Bowl before moving to Lincoln. UCF was 6-7 in Year 1, as it took some time to install his systems, but the Knights were 13-0 in Year 2 and finished the season No. 6 in the AP Poll and No. 7 in the Coaches Poll. After an underwhelming 10-15 record in Big 12 play under Gus Malzahn over the last two years, there has to be optimism surrounding Frost's return.

Rich Rodriguez (West Virginia)
Speaking of reunions, it seems like country roads have indeed taken RichRod home. The 62-year-old played at West Virginia, started his coaching career at WVU, was a position coach in 1989, and then the head coach from 2001-07 before stops at Michigan, Arizona, Ole Miss, Hawaii, Louisiana-Monroe, and, most recently, Jacksonville State. Talk about a career coming full circle. On his watch, the Mountaineers finished in the top 10 twice in the AP Poll and three times in the Coaches poll. He hadn't found that kind of success until Jacksonville State was 27-10 (18-3) during his time with the Gamecocks. Both sides of the ball really need a jolt following the Neal Brown years.

BIG TEN
Barry Odom (Purdue)
Only one coaching change in the Big Ten, as Odom goes from a very successful season at UNLV to his second crack as a Power Four/Five head coach. He was the sideline boss at Missouri from 2016-19 and went 25-25 at his alma mater. Purdue is an exceedingly difficult gig. The Big Ten got a lot stronger when four teams from the Pac-12 merged into the conference and boosters are way more interested in the basketball side of things. But, Odom is a top-tier defensive mind and has to help a unit that was 127th in yards per play allowed.

GROUP OF FIVE NEW HEAD COACHES

Technically, Group of Six*, as I've included the Pac-2 in this section. These are in alphabetical order by program.

Dowell Loggains (Appalachian State, Sun Belt)
The former Arkansas QB spent more than a decade as a position coach/analyst in the NFL before dipping his toes in the collegiate waters as Arkansas's tight ends coach in 2021-22. That led to a job on Shane Beamer's staff at South Carolina as the OC/QB Coach. Now, Loggains gets his first crack as a head coach at the age of 44. Loggains has not stayed in one place very long, so we'll see how this plays out over the long haul, but he's a sharp offensive mind. The more important hire is defensive coordinator D.C. Smith, who has to fix a stunningly bad App State unit in 2024 as he returns to his alma mater.

Tim Albin (Charlotte, AAC)
Frank Solich was the head coach at Ohio from 2005-20. His longtime apprentice, first at Nebraska and then at Ohio, gave four years to the Bobcats in Athens before making the move to the AAC to take over Charlotte's fledgling program. As a FBS member, which dates back to 2015, the 49ers are 37-78. Albin is coming off of 30 wins in the span of three seasons. His offenses work best with a mobile, dual-threat QB and a strong running game. The Bobcats were also terrific on defense under him, but the AAC is a much more dynamic offensive conference than the MAC. Albin's coordinators stayed behind, so this could take some time to come together.

Zach Kittley (FAU, AAC)
Welcome the West Coast Offense to Boca Raton. Or we can call it the Fun 'N Gun. Whatever it is, it might be enough to get the retirees out of their seats and more excited about the Owls program. I'm not sure people realize just how bad this program has been outside of two double-digit winning seasons from Lane Kiffin. Kiffin and interim head coaches Brian Wright (4-0) and Glenn Spencer (1-0) are the only coaches with winning records. And, frankly, the only other one close is Willie Taggart, who was 15-18. The 33-year-old Kittley has been a rapid riser in the coaching world, but this roster isn't really built to his specifications. At least not yet.

Mike Uremovich (Ball State, MAC)
The first of five coaching changes in the MAC, Uremovich takes over for Mike Neu after a successful stint with nearby Butler. Uremovich is also plenty familiar with the MAC, as he was an assistant for Northern Illinois and a graduate assistant while getting his Master's in DeKalb. Butler was ranked for the first time in program history during the Uremovich tenure and his deep Indiana roots are thought to be a positive in this job, as Ball State gets poached by bigger programs and has to do the same to FCS and JUCO programs to fill out rosters. The bar is low for Uremovich, as Ball State is 1-8 in bowl games and hasn't made one since 2021.

Eddie George (Bowling Green, MAC)
Yes, that Eddie George. The College Football Hall of Famer, who racked up nearly 4,000 rushing yards in effectively two seasons as a starter at Ohio State, is now a coach in the Buckeye State. George took Tennessee State to the FCS Playoffs in his fourth season at the helm, something that hadn't been done since 2013. It was also the first season with at least nine wins in over a decade. The 51-year-old jack-of-all-trades, who has several acting credits to his name, takes over for Scot Loeffler, who was just 27-38 over six seasons, leaving the Falcons at 34-62 since Dino Babers left in 2015.

Matt Drinkall (Central Michigan, MAC)
In terms of major schematic changes, Central Michigan is near the top of the list. Drinkall was most recently at Army and had a long stint as the head coach at Kansas Wesleyan prior to that. This is going to be a "power-spread offense," which means a lot of shotgun and pistol formations and requires a mobile QB. This was one of the nation's weakest offenses, but did achieve balance with 1,993 rushing yards and 1,961 passing yards. This is going to be a run-first group. They'll look to keep the defense from getting exposed with ball control on offense. We'll see how the markets adjust, but this looks like an Under team early in the year and maybe throughout.

Matt Entz (Fresno State, Mountain West)
A very intriguing hire here, as Entz was North Dakota State's head coach from 2019-23 after serving as the DC from 2014-18 under Chris Klieman. He spent last season as the associate head coach and linebackers coach at USC and Fresno State jumped at the chance to hire the two-time FCS National Champion. The Bulldogs had a rare down year offensively last season, but new OC Nick Davis had a very potent offense at South Dakota, one that even beat North Dakota State in the regular season. Entz has substantial defensive chops. This is a fantastic hire and maybe the best of all the Group of Five changes.

Willie Simmons (FIU, Conference USA)
One of the toughest jobs in the country is FIU. Butch Davis had three pretty successful seasons from 2017-19, but when he asked for more resources and raises for his assistants, everything fell apart. The team went 1-16 in Davis' last two seasons and then 8-16 under Mike MacIntyre before Simmons was hired. He's primarily been a running backs coach at the FBS level, but he was the head coach at Prairie View A&M and Florida A&M for six seasons, racking up a strong 66-24 record. The Rattlers actually won the Celebration Bowl in 2023 before he went to Duke for a quick one-year stay. Expect FIU to improve on offense, as Simmons was a QB in college and obviously values running the ball.

Charles Kelly (Jacksonville State, Conference USA)
Kelly brings a ton of high-level coaching experience to the Gamecocks, as he's been on staffs at Georgia Tech, Florida State, Tennessee, Alabama, Colorado, and, most recently, Auburn. His bread is buttered on the defensive side of the ball and he was a DB at Auburn in the late '80s. He actually coached at Jax State from 1994-98, including a year as the OC. Primarily, though, he's been a DB coach DC, or co-DC. Given Rich Rodriguez's success with the Gamecocks, there's some early pressure in this gig for a first-time HC with a roster that got ravaged by graduation and the transfer portal.

Jerry Mack (Kennesaw State, Conference USA)
Last season was an odd one for Kennesaw State. The Owls were a first-year FBS member and went into the season with a 10th-year head coach in Brian Bohannon. After stewarding the team through the FBS tradition and a ton of FCS success, he was fired following a 1-8 start. The 44-year-old Mack has been an offensive assistant for most of his career, most recently serving as the running backs coach for the Tennessee Volunteers and then the NFL's Jaguars. He was 31-15 as the HC at NC Central from 2014-17, so he isn't a first-time HC, but virtually everything is new here. The roster has been overhauled, not to mention the schemes and the coaches.

Mark Carney (Kent State, MAC)
There are some bad jobs in college football and there are some really bad jobs. Kent State falls into the latter bucket. Carney is essentially a hometown hire, as he played high school ball at St. Edward in Lakewood and has coached at Bowling Green, Baldwin-Wallace, and Kent State. He was elevated from OC to interim HC when Kenni Burns was placed on administrative leave. For a program with limited resources and a university viewed more as a basketball school, he'll have the chance to prove he deserves the job, as the Golden Flashes look to go the cheapest route possible with their coaching hires. Given that Kent State is 1-23 over the last two seasons, it's virtually impossible to do worse.

Joe Harasymiak (Massachusetts, MAC)
UMass returns to a conference this season, as they'll be a MAC member. The 38-year-old Harasymiak was the DC at Rutgers last season and is a head coach for the second time, as he had three years at Maine from 2016-18. During that 2018 season, Harasymiak took the Black Bears to the FCS semifinals and a top-five ranking. The 4-2-5 scheme that Harasymiak used at Rutgers will travel up the coast to Amherst and longtime offensive assistant Mike Bajakian will serve as OC. This is a multi-year process and this might be a really bad product early in the year with so much turnover.

Tony Gibson (Marshall, Sun Belt)
There are a few longtime assistants in this coaching cycle getting their first crack and Gibson is one of them. He was most recently at NC State with a solid head coach in Dave Doeren and was with Dana Holgorsen at West Virginia prior to that. The 52-year-old Van, WV native hails from a town of less than 200 people, but just a couple of hours from where he now calls home. We'll see what kind of coaching chops he has with a completely rebuilt roster and a program that may struggle with the abrupt transition with Charles Huff's departure that ultimately led to the program canceling its Independence Bowl appearance because of a mass exodus in the portal.

Jason Eck (New Mexico, Mountain West)
Three years, three playoff appearances for Idaho under Eck's watch, as the former Wisconsin offensive lineman gets his first crack coaching at the FBS level. In fact, this is Eck's first FBS stop since 2009-10 when he coached the big boys up front at Ball State. Like most of the programs on this year's list and on the list more often than not, this is a really hard place to win. By all accounts, Eck is a very energetic guy and will try to get as physical and tough of a team on the field in Albuquerque as he can. While Bronco Mendenhall failed to have a winning season with the Lobos, the five wins were the program's high mark since 2016, so Eck should have a long leash.

Scott Abell (Rice, AAC)
After going 47-28 at Davidson with two Pioneer League championships and three postseason appearances, Abell gets his first attempt as a FBS coach of any kind. Overall, Abell was 86-52 between Division III and Division I-AA FCS, but he was 0-5 in playoff games. The last Rice coach to have a winning record was Todd Graham in 2006 when he went 7-6. The last one before that? Jimmy Kitts from 1934-39. Abell has worked at two schools with high academic standards, which has handcuffed Rice in the past, and is bringing the option offense to the Owls. A good fit all in all, especially for a program that has literally nothing to lose by trying something new.

Phil Longo (Sam Houston State, Conference USA)
I'm not sure any offensive coordinator has bounced around as much as Longo, who gets his first crack as a head coach since 2004-05 with La Salle. The 57-year-old was most recently the OC at Wisconsin and those were two uninspiring years. Longo was the OC and QB Coach at SHSU from 2014-16, so the Air Raid returns once again. As the head coach of the Explorers, Longo posted a 7-14 record at La Salle in the MAAC. Times have changed and he's a far more experienced coach, but with a mostly revamped roster and a program still trying to build up FBS-level resources as a third-year member, I have significant concerns.

Charles Huff (Southern Miss, Sun Belt)
Huff stays in the Sun Belt, moving from Huntington to Hattiesburg, as he spent four years at Marshall, including a 10-win campaign last year. When Huff left the Thundering Herd, they were forced to cancel their Independence Bowl berth because so many players hit the transfer portal. To be fair, Huff was operating on the final year of his contract and the program didn't believe enough in him to extend him before the season. So, now he's with the Golden Eagles, a program that desperately needs a shake-up. They went 1-11 under interim Will Stringer after Will Hall went 13-24 over three seasons. The 42-year-old Huff seems like a strong hire.

K.C. Keeler (Temple, AAC)
Keeler oversaw Sam Houston State's transition from a FCS powerhouse to a FBS doormat, as the Bearkats went just 3-9 in their first season as a Division I-A member. Undeterred, the now 65-year-old head coach flipped the script with a literal 180, as the Bearkats went 9-3 and made their first bowl game appearance at college football's highest level. Keeler fell just three wins shy of 100 over his 11 seasons in Huntsville, TX, but was a National Champion during the odd 2020-21 FCS season. The Emmaus, PA native is close to home once again after over a decade at Delaware in the early 2000s. All three Owls in the AAC have new head coaches this season and Keeler may very well have the hardest job of all of them. Temple has won 13 games over the last five seasons and has won exactly three games in four straight seasons.

Tre Lamb (Tulsa, AAC)
The 35-year-old Lamb started as the QB coach at his alma mater, Tennessee Tech, back in 2013. By 2020, he was the head coach at Gardner-Webb. A one-year stop in Johnson City at East Tennessee State was enough to get him a FBS gig, as the rudderless Tulsa program took a shot on the up-and-comer. Another bright offensive mind, Kevin Wilson, couldn't make it work at Tulsa. Will Lamb find more success? By all accounts, this is going to be a non-traditional spread offense with tons of different looks and some innovative concepts. Now, Lamb just needs better players to execute them.

Dan Mullen (UNLV, Mountain West)
After a four-year hiatus, Mullen is back on the sidelines. He was a studio analyst and color commentator for three years on ABC and ESPN before UNLV was able to get him back into coaching. He's a very accomplished head coach, even with a sour finish at Florida in his final season. Often outmanned at Mississippi State, Mullen found ways to pull at least one noteworthy upset on an annual basis and turned Dak Prescott into a pretty good QB. It seemed like UNLV would be in a tough spot with Odom's departure, but is it fair to say that they've actually upgraded? I think so.

Bronco Mendenhall (Utah State, Mountain West)
Mendenhall is back in the state of Utah, a place where he had a ton of success as the head coach at BYU. Instead of Provo, he's now in Logan, and back in the Mountain West Conference for the first time since 2010, as the Cougars played as an Independent from 2011-15 prior to Mendenhall's tenure at Virginia. It has been quite the odd stretch for this program, as Gary Andersen's two-year return in 2019-20 was a mess and Blake Anderson was fired in 2023 for not properly reporting sexual misconduct. Mendenhall should provide some stability and has the chance to turn the program back around quickly.

Jimmy Rogers (Washington State, Pac-2)
Washington State will play as an orphan for one more year before joining the new-look Pac-8 for 2026. The Cougars bid adieu to Jake Dickert, who went across the country to Wake Forest and brought in the 38-year-old Rogers, who ascended very quickly at South Dakota State. He played there and was a graduate assistant there before coaching the Jackrabbits for over a decade. As the head coach, he was 27-3 over two seasons and 6-1 in the FCS Playoffs, including the 2023 National Championship. This looks like a strong hire and Wazzu's placement back in a conference should help recruiting as we go forward.

STABILITY ON THE FIELD, CONSISTENCY AT THE COUNTER

BY STEVE MAKINEN

Each summer, I have been sharing with subscribers my methodology on College Football Stability Scores. I offer the analysis at the beginning of every season, and to be exact, for the first four weeks of every season (Weeks 0-3). It is the foremost strategy I employ every year to find value early. The thought behind it is that teams that are in more stable year-to-year situations are better bets early, while those that have undergone a lot of change in the offseason should be faded.

The logic is fundamentally sound. Returning fewer starters, starting over at quarterback, and welcoming in new head coaches or coordinators are always hurdles to get over for teams. Eventually the teams may overcome these hurdles, even later that season, but the general thought is that it doesn't happen early, and oddsmakers don't account for these factors nearly enough in building their lines.

A lot of the foundation of what is considered "stable" or not in college football has been shaken in recent years as teams, fans, bettors, and oddsmakers alike all wrestle with the impact of the transfer portal. I have also thought long and hard about the subject and have concluded over the last few years that instability is instability, regardless of the form in which it comes. To me, the position is of such importance that a transfer quarterback for a team, even if he has three years of starting experience somewhere else, I still consider him a NEW quarterback. So, how am I dealing with the transfer portal starters? I consider former starters at other schools acquired through the transfer portal at other positions as starters. I consider transfer QBs new.

Over the last 13 years or so, I have implemented an early-season strategy that employs backing the teams with the greatest stability ratings in matchups against those in the most unstable situations. I can tell you that in those 13 years I have NEVER experienced a losing record by playing the games on the lists for the four weeks of the season. The degree of success has varied during that span, but in all 13 years I have closed with a profit, including last year, when the plays I shared went 23-14 ATS (62.2%). That was actually a better winning percentage year than usual, although it also produced 16 fewer plays than in '23, when it showed a result of 30-23 for 56.5%. Had a bettor been playing $100 wagers on each game last fall they would have profited $760. I know in hearing from readers that there were in fact bettors who DID play all 37 contests.

I figure that the higher level of stability, the better the chances for success for any team, particularly early in the season. Naturally, putting a numerical grade to it makes it easier to spot this stability. Again, the point spread considered, the feeling is that oddsmakers don't adjust enough for the "instability".

> " I can tell you that in those 13 years I have NEVER experienced a losing record by playing the games on the lists for the four weeks of the season. "

At the end of the article, I've put together a chart of the College Football Stability Scores for 2025. When the season arrives, I will put together lists in each of the first four weeks detailing the top mismatches. I have found that a Stability Mismatch score of 8 is the minimum on which I will consider a play for this thought process. Incidentally, KANSAS (16) hosting Fresno State (1) in Week 0 shows the first 2025 playable game with a difference of 15.

Here is how the scores are determined:

RETURNING HEAD COACH POINTS
Yes, same Head Coach as 2024: 4 points
No, new Head Coach for 2025: 0 points

RETURNING OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR POINTS
Yes, same Offensive Coordinator as 2024: 3 points
No, new Offensive Coordinator for 2025: 0 points

RETURNING DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR POINTS
Yes, same Defensive Coordinator as 2024: 3 points
No, new Defensive Coordinator for 2025: 0 points

SAME STARTING QUARTERBACK POINTS
Yes, same Starting Quarterback as 2024: 4 points
No, new Starting Quarterback for 2025: 0 points

I reiterate…I consider a transfer quarterback that is expected to start for his team as a NEW QUARTERBACK, regardless of the starting experience level he brings to the table. For 2025, there are again numerous recognizable QB's that have found new starting homes across the country. While they are not your typical first-year quarterbacks, they are NEW to those programs.

TOTAL NUMBER OF RETURNING STARTERS POINTS
0-7 returning offensive & defensive starters: 0 points
8-9: 1 point
10-12: 2 points
13-16: 3 points
17-19: 4 points
20-22: 5 points

As you can see, a perfect score is 19. The worst score a team can have is ZERO, and that has happened more often in each of the last three years than it had in the 10 years prior combined. So, as you analyze the chart of the 136 FBS teams, you'll see that there are again teams this season in both very stable and very unsettling situations. Looking back at the last five years, prior to the 2020 season, there were a total of 19 teams that were returning 17 starters or more. For 2021, there were 69 such teams, more than half of the total FBS programs! The average for the last four seasons, including 2025, has been just 14.5, including just seven this fall. Furthermore, in 2021, there were 89 teams that brought back their starting quarterbacks, along with eight entire starting offensive units and nine full defenses. For 2022, those numbers dropped to 78 QB's, ZERO full offenses, and just one intact defense. In 2023, there were 72 returning starting QB's, and only one intact unit of any kind. In 2024, only 53 starting quarterbacks returned to the spot they occupied last season with two units intact. Finally, for 2025, we are back up to 63 teams with returning starting QB's but only one unit intact, that being the Texas Tech defense.

Regarding program leadership, there are also 30 new head coaches along with 112 coordinator changes, resulting in 19 teams with Stability Scores of 3 or less, the most I have seen in a season since employing this system, one more than a year ago. I had naively predicted that there would be a return to normalcy after the 2021 season but clearly that has not been the case due to the transfer portal and its effect on both quarterbacks and coaching staffs.

Let's dig into the teams on both ends of the stability scale a little deeper.

HIGHLY STABLE TEAMS WITH SCORES OF 18 OR HIGHER

In 2019, there were seven teams with scores of 18 or higher, and in 2020, there were only three. For 2021, the number ballooned to 30 teams that met that benchmark for stability! Keep in mind, the maximum score is 19. From 2022-2025, the average was just 6.25 including the four for this fall. Even with all of this inconsistency, the stability system continues to thrive as it is.

In short, these programs figure to be in good shape for the coming season, at least early.

ARIZONA STATE (BIG 12) – 18
I wrote last week about how Arizona State's recruiting efforts this spring fell off surprisingly following last year's Big 12 title and CFP run. Am I worried about HC Kenny Dillingham's team for 2025 after such a strange occurrence? Absolutely not. This Sun Devils' team comes back loaded from that 11-3 team, led by QB Sam Leavitt, who threw for nearly 3,000 yards and a 24-6 TD-Int ratio. In all 17 starters are back, a lofty number by today's standards. They will have to replace RB Cam Skattebo, but look for Army transfer RB Kanye Udoh and returning 1,000-yard WR Jordyn Tyson to pick up for the lost production. This team should be a contender again for another conference title.

Kenny Dillingham
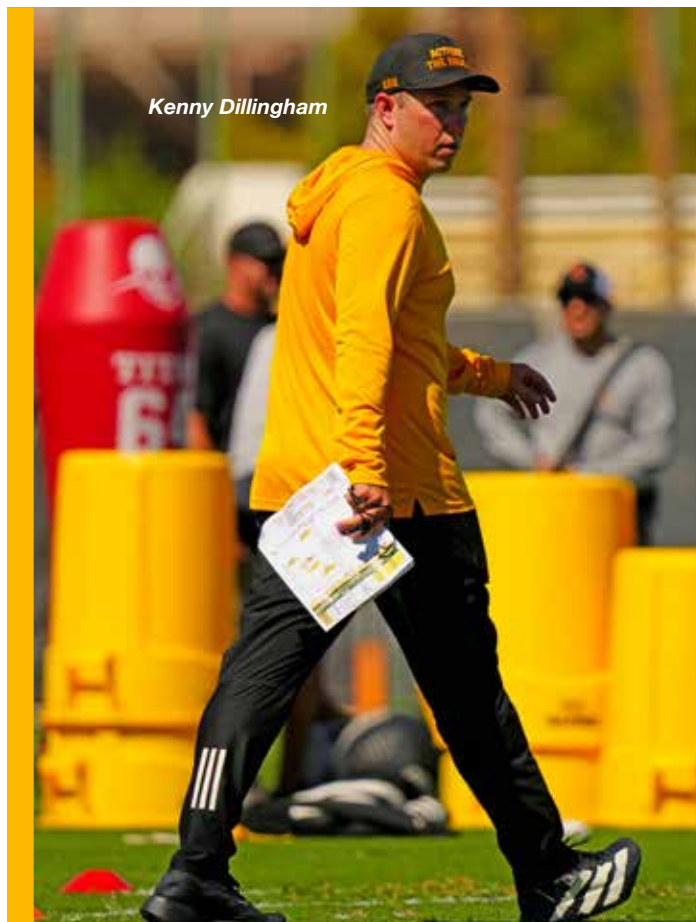
BAYLOR (BIG 12) - 18
ASU isn't the only returning success story from 2024 from the Big 12 that appears to be loaded for another run this fall. Consider Baylor a front-runner in the conference as well, as HC Dave Aranda brings back 17 starters from his 8-5 team of last fall, including his quarterback, top two rushers, and top two pass catchers. This team already made massive strides from '23 to '24, going from 3-9 to 8-5 while also increasing its offensive production from 23.1 to 34.4 PPG. The early season for Aranda's team is EXTREMELY tough with home games versus Auburn and Arizona State, as well as a trip to SMU all in the first four weeks. Fortunately, we have learned that the most stable teams tend to fare well early in the season. If the Bears emerge unscathed from that set of contests, the sky is the limit.

CLEMSON (ACC) – 18
Clemson is another team that got mentioned in my recent recruiting rankings study for its slipping success levels in that regard. For the most part, this seems to be due to HC Dabo Swinney's hesitancy to fully embrace the transfer portal other than to fill select roster openings. Although the Tigers haven't been national championship-worthy in the last half-decade or so, it hasn't hurt them terribly, as they are able to keep most of the guys they originally recruited and developed. This year figures to be one in which they benefit from that strategy, as there are a number of multi-year performers back and ready to get this team back for another CFP run. One of those is QB Cade Klubnik, now a senior with 28 starts under his belt. He leads a group of 17 starters back from a team that won the ACC and went 10-4 in '24. Nine starters are back on defense, looking to improve on allowing 23,4 PPG, the worst for the unit in 12 years. The experience should help a lot in that area. Clemson will be tested right out of the gate in a home game vs. LSU, another stable program for '25, However, Swinney's team does appear to be the class of the ACC.

ILLINOIS (BIG TEN) – 18
Illinois has clearly become an emerging football program under HC Bret Bielema, and 2025 could be the season that the Illini show the country just how good they are. This team won 10 games last season for the first time since 2001, improving by five wins from '23. It could be only the start though, as 19 starters return for Bielema this fall, including senior QB Luke Altmyer, who had a very good season in '24, putting up a 22-6 TD-Int ratio. He leads the most experienced offense in the country back, as 10 starters are in place for that unit. The '25 slate features only one game that you'd think Illinois wouldn't be favored in, that being at home versus Ohio State in October. Dreams of a playoff bid aren't unrealistic, especially if veteran experience winds up being the difference for a team that has grown accustomed to playing in tight games.

UNSTABLE TEAMS WITH SCORES OF ZERO

From 2019-21, there were a total of 16 teams going into the fall with Stability Scores of 3 or lower. The numbers have been double-digits in each year since, including this year's total of 10. I haven't studied it as closely since 2021 with so many teams now qualifying, but at that point, the teams meeting this low benchmark were proven to be less than 45% ATS performers over the prior five-year span. Plus, with the success of the Stability System in general, it's safe to assume these teams below shouldn't be consistently wagered on this season.

APPALACHIAN STATE (SUN BELT) – 0
Appalachian State just had its first sub-.500 season since 2013, and goes in a new direction, welcoming in new head coach Dowell Loggains to try to recharge the troops. Loggains comes over from South Carolina, where he served as offensive coordinator for the Gamecocks for the last two seasons. His job won't be easy as this program seems to be on the downward side of a "mountain", pardon the pun, one that peaked from 2015-21, a seven-year span in which the Mountaineers won 73 games. He has only seven returning starters. Fortunately for Loggains, his team starts the season with two other unstable programs in Charlotte and Southern Miss, and another vs. FCS Lindenwood. Perhaps this won't be as bad of a situation as feared, particularly with transfer QB AJ Swann, a former starter at Vandy expected to take over the offense's key spot.

BOWLING GREEN – (MAC) – 0

Bowling Green made an interesting head coaching hire this offseason, bringing in NFL Hall of Fame running back Eddie George to lead the efforts in carrying on the momentum of three straight bowl qualifying seasons. While new to FBS, this isn't his first head job, as George led the Tennessee State football program for the last four years, winning an Ohio Valley title last year while earning conference COY honors. The biggest challenge for him in his first season at BGSU will be on the defensive side of the ball, where just one starter returns from a unit that allowed just 21.6 PPG, its best in over a decade. Even still, if you're wondering what the experts behind the counter think of this team's situation in '25, DraftKings has set a season win prop of 6.5 for the Falcons. Much of that optimism could stem from George bringing in former Notre Dame starting QB Drew Pyne to take over the Falcons' offense. That is a clear win for a MAC program. We'll see how it goes, but there are a lot of unstable situations in the conference for '25, this certainly doesn't appear to be the worst of them.

CHARLOTTE (AMERICAN) - 0

Most Charlotte fans were quite fond of the hiring of former head coach Biff Poggi a few years ago because of the attitude and fire it brought to the program. It didn't translate into enough wins however, and he was fired with two games remaining last season. His replacement is Tim Albin, a very strong hire for the program. Albin has plenty of Group of Five FBS experience, having served as Ohio's head man for the last four seasons, where he was 33-19. Only seven starters are back though, and it could take a little while for Albin to get his footing because of it. The good news is that the first four opponents show an FCS foe, two other FBS teams with stability scores of ZERO and one other with a 2. Albin's been successful in similar level football, and with UNC transfer QB Conner Harrell coming in, there is some reason for optimism.

FLORIDA ATLANTIC (AMERICAN) – 0

Lane Kiffin established new standards while at FAU. Since he left a handful of years ago, his replacements have been unable to match the lofty level of success that he attained. The latest victim to fall was Tom Herman, who was just 12-24 in three seasons for the Owls. The program goes in a different direction this time, bringing in an inexperienced, young guy in Zach Kittley. He is just 33 years old and comes off a successful stint as the OC at Texas Tech. He also has transfer Caden Veltkamp of Western Kentucky. There are several other American teams that would figure to be in worse shape than FAU, especially after the Veltkamp move. However, with only six starters back, this will be an unstable situation early, and the Owls will for sure be a play against team in the opener at Maryland by my Stability System.

JACKSONVILLE STATE – (CONFERENCE USA) - 0

Former head coach Rich Rodriguez leves this newer FBS program in great shape for replacement Charles Kelly, as very few programs that have transitioned lately to college football's highest level can match the success that the Gamecocks have enjoyed the last two years. That said, it is only natural to expect a drop-off in '25, as Kelly has only three starters back on each side of the ball and will be changing schemes dramatically from what Rodriguez ran. Look for JSU to be a play against Stability System qualifier in Weeks 2 and 3 versus Liberty & Georgia Southern.

MARSHALL (SUN BELT) – 0

Former head coach Charles Huff's unresolvable contract dispute left Marshall in utter disarray for its bowl game, an eventual 35-17 loss to UTSA. If you think the Herd team that played in the Cure Bowl was unstable, you'll get a whole lot more of that in the early part of the upcoming season under new HC Tony Gibson, who served the last six years as DC at NC State. He has just four starters back to show from last year's 10-3 team. There may not be another program this season that bears less resemblance to its '24 self. The '25 campaign starts as tough as it gets, with a trip to Georgia to face a very stable Bulldogs' team that is hungry after its CFP disappointment in January.

MASSACHUSETTS (MAC) – 0

Mass instability is the name of the game in this part of the article, and the situation at UMass figures to fit that bill. There will be just seven starters back from last year's 2-10 team, which in some ways, could wind up being a good thing since eight wins in six seasons demands a house cleaning. If you think that moving to the MAC could help hasten the rebuilding efforts for new head coach Joe Harasymiak and the Minutemen, perhaps you'd like the Over 3.5 on their team win prop. After all, there are a lot of unstable teams from the MAC this season. Plus, Harasymiak has brought in a former P4 quarterback in Brandon Rose (Utah). Keep in mind though, this program is just 8-56 over the last six seasons.

NEW MEXICO – (MOUNTAIN WEST) – 0

It was a short stay for Bronco Mendenhall at New Mexico, unfortunate since he led the Lobos to a 5-7 record in '24, the program's best mark since 2016. He opted for the head position at Mountain West rival Utah State shortly after the season. Instead, for '25, the Lobos will turn to Jason Eck, who has made six different stops at FCS schools over the L15 years, including most recently at Idaho, where he served as head coach from '22-24. Eck will look to keep the momentum going from the one season under Mendenhall, but it's never easy for a program when an abrupt, unexpected change like this occurs. New Mexico football was "back" last season after a miserable run of seven straight years winning four games or fewer. Now, with just seven starters back, the Lobos are again generally picked as the worst team in the MWC, and Eck will have his hands full. One slight reason for optimism - Eck brings with him his Idaho starting QB, a junior, Jack Layne, and he is expected to earn the job in Albuquerque. That will lessen the scheme change impact. Still, this will be a play against team in both of its FBS games (Michigan, UCLA) in the first three weeks.

RICE (AMERICAN) – 0

Former Rice HC Mike Bloomgren managed to last seven full seasons despite not finishing with a winning record even a single time in that stretch. Perhaps a change WAS in order. The Owls now turn to Scott Abell, who after a successful turnaround of the Davidson program, gets a FCS to FBS promotion. He runs an option offense, so expect a completely new look for Rice in '25. With that in mind, this situation will represent one of, if not, the biggest changeover in the country in terms of systems. To be frank, it's difficult to imagine a situation where it's successful. Seven starters are back, but this will be a play against Stability System qualifier in Week 1 vs. Louisiana.

UNLV (MOUNTAIN WEST) – 0

Barry Odom changed the trajectory of UNLV football the last three seasons, as the Runnin' Rebels won 26 games during his stay. Even in leaving, he had the program in desirable enough shape where they could bring in a former big name Power Four coach in Dan Mullen, who has an important job to do in not only maintaining the winning standard established by Odom, but also in keeping this program relevant in the Las Vegas area. It had slipped in that regard dramatically prior to Odom's arrival. To be fair though, the move for the program into Allegiant Stadium and the draw of Sin City has Mullen in an ideal situation to succeed. It has already shown some nice early returns, as he was able to attract a lot of Power Four talent to UNLV. On paper, only four starters return, but the transfer portal, led by former Virginia QB Anthony Colandrea, has this team ready to compete again for a MWC crown. Be careful with this team early though, since the first month of the season is where mass instability tends to rear its ugly head.

TEAM (CONFERENCE)	2024 RECORD	HC?	CHANGE? (0-YES) OC?	DC?	QB?	RET STRS	TOTAL STABILITY
AIR FORCE (MWC)	5-7	4	3	3	0	3 (13)	13
AKRON (MAC)	4-8	4	0	3	4	0 (7)	11
ALABAMA (SEC)	9-4	4	3	3	0	3 (15)	13
APPALACHIAN ST (SBC)	5-6	0	0	0	0	0 (7)	0
ARIZONA (B12)	4-8	4	0	0	4	3 (16)	11
ARIZONA ST (B12)	11-3	4	3	3	4	4 (17)	18
ARKANSAS (SEC)	7-6	4	3	3	4	3 (13)	17
ARKANSAS ST (SBC)	8-5	4	3	0	4	1 (8)	12
ARMY (AAC)	12-3	4	3	3	0	1 (9)	11
AUBURN (SEC)	5-7	4	3	3	0	3 (14)	13
BALL ST (MAC)	3-9	0	0	3	0	0 (7)	3
BAYLOR (B12)	8-5	4	3	3	4	4 (18)	18
BOISE ST (MWC)	12-2	4	3	3	4	3 (14)	17
BOSTON COLLEGE (ACC)	7-6	4	3	3	0	2 (11)	12
BOWLING GREEN (MAC)	7-6	0	0	0	0	0 (6)	0
BUFFALO (MAC)	9-4	4	3	3	0	3 (15)	13
BYU (B12)	11-2	4	3	3	0	1 (8)	11
C MICHIGAN (MAC)	4-8	0	0	0	4	2 (10)	6
CALIFORNIA (ACC)	6-7	4	0	0	0	3 (14)	7
CHARLOTTE (AAC)	5-7	0	0	0	0	0 (7)	0
CINCINNATI (B12)	5-7	4	3	3	4	3 (15)	17
CLEMSON (ACC)	10-4	4	3	3	4	4 (17)	18
COASTAL CAROLINA (SBC)	6-7	4	0	0	0	1 (9)	5
COLORADO (B12)	9-4	4	3	3	0	2 (11)	12
COLORADO ST (MWC)	8-5	4	3	0	4	0 (6)	11
CONNECTICUT (IND)	9-4	4	3	3	4	2 (11)	16
DELAWARE (CUSA)	9-2	4	3	3	4	3 (15)	17
DUKE (ACC)	9-4	4	3	3	0	2 (12)	12
E MICHIGAN (MAC)	5-7	4	3	3	0	1 (8)	11
EAST CAROLINA (AAC)	8-5	0	3	0	4	0 (6)	7
FLA ATLANTIC (AAC)	3-9	0	0	0	0	0 (6)	0
FLA INTERNATIONAL (CUSA)	4-8	0	0	3	4	0 (6)	7
FLORIDA (SEC)	8-5	4	3	3	4	3 (15)	17
FLORIDA ST (ACC)	2-10	4	0	0	0	3 (15)	7
FRESNO ST (MWC)	6-7	0	0	0	0	1 (8)	1
GA SOUTHERN (SBC)	8-5	4	3	3	4	3 (13)	17
GEORGIA (SEC)	11-3	4	3	3	0	2 (11)	12
GEORGIA ST (SBC)	3-9	4	0	0	4	2 (10)	10
GEORGIA TECH (ACC)	7-6	4	3	0	4	3 (14)	14
HAWAII (MWC)	5-7	4	0	3	0	3 (15)	10
HOUSTON (B12)	4-8	4	0	0	0	3 (15)	7
ILLINOIS (B10)	10-3	4	3	3	4	4 (19)	18
INDIANA (B10)	11-2	4	3	3	0	3 (15)	13
IOWA (B10)	8-5	4	3	3	0	2 (11)	12
IOWA ST (B12)	11-3	4	3	3	4	3 (13)	17

TEAM (CONFERENCE)	2024 RECORD	HC?	CHANGE? (0-YES) OC?	DC?	QB?	RET STRS	TOTAL STABILITY
JACKSONVILLE ST (CUSA)	9-5	0	0	0	0	0 (6)	0
JAMES MADISON (SBC)	9-4	4	3	0	4	2 (10)	13
KANSAS (B12)	5-7	4	3	3	4	2 (10)	16
KANSAS ST (B12)	9-4	4	3	3	4	2 (10)	16
KENNESAW ST (CUSA)	2-10	0	0	0	0	2 (12)	2
KENT ST (MAC)	0-12	0	3	3	0	0 (6)	6
KENTUCKY (SEC)	4-8	4	3	3	0	2 (12)	12
LA LAFAYETTE (SBC)	10-4	4	3	3	0	0 (7)	10
LA MONROE (SBC)	5-7	4	3	3	4	2 (10)	16
LIBERTY (CUSA)	8-4	4	3	3	0	3 (14)	13
LOUISIANA TECH (CUSA)	5-8	4	0	0	4	1 (9)	9
LOUISVILLE (ACC)	9-4	4	3	3	0	3 (15)	13
LSU (SEC)	9-4	4	3	3	4	3 (16)	17
MARSHALL (SBC)	10-3	0	0	0	0	0 (4)	0
MARYLAND (B10)	4-8	4	0	3	0	2 (10)	9
MASSACHUSETTS (IND)	2-10	0	0	0	0	0 (7)	0
MEMPHIS (AAC)	11-2	4	3	3	0	1 (8)	11
MIAMI FL (ACC)	10-3	4	3	0	0	3 (14)	10
MIAMI OHIO (MAC)	9-5	4	3	3	0	0 (5)	10
MICHIGAN (B10)	8-5	4	0	3	4	3 (14)	14
MICHIGAN ST (B10)	5-7	4	3	3	4	3 (15)	17
MIDDLE TENN ST (CUSA)	3-9	4	3	3	4	3 (15)	17
MINNESOTA (B10)	8-5	4	3	0	0	2 (12)	9
MISSISSIPPI ST (SEC)	2-10	4	3	3	4	3 (16)	17
MISSOURI (SEC)	10-3	4	3	3	0	3 (15)	13
MISSOURI ST (CUSA)	8-4	4	3	3	4	1 (9)	15
N ILLINOIS (MAC)	8-5	4	0	0	0	0 (5)	4
NAVY (AAC)	11-3	4	3	3	4	3 (13)	17
NC STATE (ACC)	6-7	4	0	0	4	3 (15)	11
NEBRASKA (B10)	7-6	4	0	0	4	3 (15)	11
NEVADA (MWC)	3-10	4	0	3	0	0 (6)	7
NEW MEXICO (MWC)	5-7	0	0	0	0	0 (7)	0
NEW MEXICO ST (CUSA)	3-9	4	0	3	4	1 (9)	12
NORTH CAROLINA (ACC)	6-7	0	0	0	0	2 (11)	2
NORTH TEXAS (AAC)	6-7	4	3	0	0	3 (14)	10
NORTHWESTERN (B10)	4-8	4	3	3	0	3 (14)	13
NOTRE DAME (IND)	14-2	4	3	0	0	3 (14)	10
OHIO ST (B10)	14-2	4	3	0	0	1 (9)	8
OHIO U (MAC)	11-3	0	0	3	4	2 (10)	9
OKLAHOMA (SEC)	6-7	4	0	3	0	3 (15)	10
OKLAHOMA ST (B12)	3-9	4	0	0	0	2 (10)	6
OLD DOMINION (SBC)	5-7	4	3	3	4	2 (11)	16
OLE MISS (SEC)	10-3	4	3	3	0	2 (12)	12
OREGON (B10)	13-1	4	3	3	0	3 (14)	13
OREGON ST (P12)	5-7	4	3	0	0	2 (11)	9

TEAM (CONFERENCE)	2024 RECORD	HC?	CHANGE? (0-YES) OC?	DC?	QB?	RET STRS	TOTAL STABILITY
PENN ST (B10)	13-3	4	3	0	4	3 (15)	14
PITTSBURGH (ACC)	7-6	4	3	3	4	3 (16)	17
PURDUE (B10)	1-11	0	0	0	0	1 (8)	1
RICE (AAC)	4-8	0	0	0	0	0 (7)	0
RUTGERS (B10)	7-6	4	3	0	4	3 (16)	14
S ALABAMA (SBC)	8-6	4	0	3	0	1 (8)	8
SAM HOUSTON ST (CUSA)	10-3	0	0	0	4	1 (8)	5
SAN DIEGO ST (MWC)	3-9	4	3	0	0	3 (14)	10
SAN JOSE ST (MWC)	7-6	4	3	3	4	2 (12)	16
SMU (ACC)	11-3	4	3	3	4	2 (12)	16
SOUTH CAROLINA (SEC)	9-4	4	0	3	4	2 (12)	13
SOUTH FLORIDA (AAC)	7-6	4	3	3	4	3 (16)	17
SOUTHERN MISS (SBC)	1-11	0	0	0	0	2 (11)	2
STANFORD (ACC)	3-9	0	0	3	0	3 (14)	6
SYRACUSE (ACC)	10-3	4	3	3	0	1 (8)	11
TCU (B12)	9-4	4	3	3	4	3 (14)	17
TEMPLE (AAC)	3-9	0	0	0	4	2 (10)	6
TENNESSEE (SEC)	10-3	4	3	3	0	2 (12)	12
TEXAS (SEC)	13-3	4	3	3	0	2 (11)	12
TEXAS A&M (SEC)	8-5	4	3	3	4	3 (15)	17
TEXAS ST UNIV (SBC)	8-5	4	0	3	0	0 (5)	7
TEXAS TECH (B12)	8-5	4	0	0	4	5 (21)	13
TOLEDO (MAC)	8-5	4	3	3	4	3 (13)	17
TROY (SBC)	4-8	4	3	3	4	2 (10)	16
TULANE (AAC)	9-5	4	3	3	0	3 (13)	13
TULSA (AAC)	3-9	0	0	0	4	2 (10)	6
TX-SAN ANTONIO (AAC)	7-6	4	3	3	4	2 (11)	16
UAB (AAC)	3-9	4	3	0	4	1 (8)	12
UCF (B12)	4-8	0	0	0	0	1 (9)	1
UCLA (B10)	5-7	4	0	3	0	2 (10)	9
UNLV (MWC)	11-3	0	0	0	0	0 (4)	0
USC (B10)	7-6	4	0	3	4	3 (16)	14
UTAH (B12)	5-7	4	0	3	4	4 (17)	15
UTAH ST (MWC)	4-8	0	0	0	4	1 (8)	5
UTEP (CUSA)	3-9	4	3	3	4	2 (11)	16
VANDERBILT (SEC)	7-6	4	3	0	4	4 (17)	15
VIRGINIA (ACC)	5-7	4	3	3	0	3 (14)	13
VIRGINIA TECH (ACC)	6-7	4	0	0	4	2 (12)	10
W KENTUCKY (CUSA)	8-6	4	0	0	0	0 (5)	4
W MICHIGAN (MAC)	6-8	4	3	0	0	0 (7)	7
WAKE FOREST (ACC)	4-8	0	0	0	0	2 (11)	2
WASHINGTON (B10)	6-7	4	0	0	0	2 (12)	6
WASHINGTON ST (P12)	8-5	0	0	0	0	1 (8)	1
WEST VIRGINIA (B12)	6-7	0	3	0	0	2 (10)	5
WISCONSIN (B10)	5-7	4	0	3	0	3 (13)	10
WYOMING (MWC)	3-9	4	3	3	4	2 (12)	16

POWER RATED
STANDINGS
PROJECTIONS

BY STEVE MAKINEN

In order to create my college football power ratings for the 2025 season, I analyze the returning players/coaches for the teams, make adjustments based upon last year's finish and the current perception of teams, and then ensure I have not assumed anything out of the windows for normalcy for each team's recent history or conference strength. That last point has become a bigger challenge each year, now that some teams completely revamp their rosters through the transfer portal.

I've taken my adjusted power numbers for 2025 and run them against the complete schedule to project the season standings. You will then find a listing of all the 136 FBS teams and their schedules for 2025, with my projected power ratings lines for each game included.

Use these numbers as a foundation for determining your favorite season-win total bets. I have included all of the teams' win total props available at DraftKings on the season standings chart.

Before unleashing the projections, let's look at some of the highlights from the analysis:

- I have performed at a slightly above-average level in projecting the playoff participants in recent years. However, last year, of the five teams from the Power 4 (or Independent) that I projected to win 10+ games in this same exercise, four of them made up the CFP semifinalists. If that is the case again, the CFP Final Four would consist of teams from this group: Notre Dame, Texas, Georgia, Ohio State, Penn State. As you study the ratings chart below, you'll see there are several other teams such as Clemson, Alabama, and Oregon that could join those frontrunners.
- For a second straight season, Florida plays the nation's toughest schedule, at least as it stands now.
- Wisconsin's schedule is also brutal. The Badgers have road games at Alabama, Michigan, Oregon, and Indiana, plus they host Ohio State. My figures show Bucky Badger finishing at 5.1-6.9. The teams ranked #3-#8 and #10-#12 on the schedule difficulty list are simply victims of their conference circumstances in the SEC.
- For the third straight season, Liberty holds the country's easiest schedule on paper, with its opponents averaging a 27.39 power rating. To put that in perspective, it would be like playing a team at the level of Central Michigan every week for an entire season. It's no wonder my numbers call for the Flames to go 9.5-2.5 this season.
- In terms of other weak schedules, Toledo, the favorite in the MAC, checks in at #135, and 10th-year head coach Jason Candle's team comes back loaded with 13 returning starters from last year's 8-5 team. The Rockets' win total prop is set at 8.5, and my projections have them going 8.9-3.1 against the watered-down schedule. Other programs with lighter schedules in 2025 include Middle Tennessee State, Jacksonville State, and Buffalo.
- Notre Dame has the highest win projection of any team, with 10.6, slightly better than Penn State (10.5), Ohio State (10.3), Texas (10.0), and Georgia (10.0). There are no other double-digit win projections,

thus leading many to believe that this could be as competitive of a college football season as we've seen at the top in a long time, or at least since last year's thrilling playoff.

- Assuming the projections play out accurately, besides Penn State, Ohio State, Georgia, and Texas, the other Power Four conference teams that would be expected to contend for a spot in the college football playoffs this year would be: Oregon, Clemson, Alabama, Ole Miss, Michigan, Miami, Arizona State and Kansas State. All of those teams are expected to win 8.7 regular-season games or more, according to my projections.
- Boise State (9.9), Liberty (9.5), UNLV (8.9), Toledo (8.9), and Navy (8.7) have the highest projected win totals among the Group of Five teams, although each faces an early test or two that might prevent them from going undefeated and challenging for the coveted CFP spot. The Broncos, off a 12-2 season that resulted in a CFP bye and appearance in the Fiesta Bowl, face their most challenging game, at Notre Dame, on the first Saturday in October. Circle that game on the calendar as perhaps the biggest Group of Five game of the year.
- In terms of teams expected to improve from last season, either by an enhanced power rating or an easier schedule, Southern Miss and Florida State are the two teams I have with double-digit power rating increases over their 2024 finish. The Golden Eagles and Seminoles were terrible last season, but both bring in a lot of transfer talent and get the luxury of wiping the slate clean this fall.
- Southern Miss turns to a new coach in Charles Huff, who led Marshall to a Sun Belt title last year, and he brings a lot of his former players with him. FSU's struggles were well-documented and perhaps as alarming a decline as I can recall. However, the talent is there, and head coach Mike Norvell is saying all the right things about moving on.
- No teams are expected to drop off more in 2025 than Marshall and Colorado. Marshall's situation is unprecedented as a contract dispute between the program and their former head coach led to a complete unraveling following their Sun Belt championship last December.
- Of course, the Buffaloes lost two of the best and most visible players in program history this season, with QB Shedeur Sanders and WR/CB Travis Hunter off to the NFL. Head coach Deion Sanders has recruited well, and it will be interesting to see how quickly he can build the cohesiveness of what figures to be a much different team in 2025.
- If you read this article last year, my teams expected to drop most were Michigan and Washington, the national title game participants of the prior season. The Wolverines dropped to 7-5, the Huskies to 6-6. Two years ago, TCU, then the returning national runner-up, went from 13-2 to 5-7, so there is some historic merit to these projections. Elsewhere, Jacksonville State and Texas State are other teams expected to drop off by 9.0 on my PRs for this fall.

In the confernece previews throughout this publication, you will find my projected standings for each of the conferences. The teams are sorted by conference wins. You will also find their season win total from DraftKings, their 2025 Steve Makinen Power Rating, Home and Road Field Ratings, Schedule Strength and National Ranking, plus their overall and conference record projections.

> **In terms of the projections and how they correlate to the Season Win Total Props offered up at DraftKings, here are the biggest differences. Teams expected to win more games than their DK win props include Liberty (+1.0), Illinois (+0.9), Ole Miss (+0.8), Florida (+0.9), Michigan (+0.8), and BYU (+0.8). Note that my projections for the Cougars do include the departure of QB Retzlaff.**
>
> **Teams expected to fall short of their season win props by the biggest margins include Delaware (-1.0), Bowling Green (-0.9), Hawaii (-0.8), and Missouri State (-0.8).**

STEVE MAKINEN'S
POWER RATINGS

TEAM	POWER RATING	TEAM	POWER RATING	TEAM	POWER RATING
AIR FORCE	35.0	JAMES MADISON	42.0	PURDUE	35.0
AKRON	25.0	KANSAS	49.5	RICE	28.0
ALABAMA	67.5	KANSAS ST	55.0	RUTGERS	48.0
APPALACHIAN ST	33.0	KENNESAW ST	22.5	S ALABAMA	37.0
ARIZONA	42.5	KENT ST	15.5	SAM HOUSTON ST	29.0
ARIZONA ST	56.0	KENTUCKY	48.0	SAN DIEGO ST	30.5
ARKANSAS	52.0	LA LAFAYETTE	38.5	SAN JOSE ST	37.5
ARKANSAS ST	33.5	LA MONROE	28.5	SMU	55.5
ARMY	40.5	LIBERTY	40.0	SOUTH CAROLINA	58.0
AUBURN	57.0	LOUISIANA TECH	30.0	SOUTH FLORIDA	41.0
BALL ST	21.0	LOUISVILLE	54.0	SOUTHERN MISS	30.0
BAYLOR	53.0	LSU	62.5	STANFORD	38.0
BOISE ST	51.0	MARSHALL	32.0	SYRACUSE	46.5
BOSTON COLLEGE	46.5	MARYLAND	42.0	TCU	52.0
BOWLING GREEN	29.5	MASSACHUSETTS	21.0	TEMPLE	26.5
BUFFALO	34.0	MEMPHIS	43.5	TENNESSEE	59.5
BYU	49.0	MIAMI FL	60.0	TEXAS	69.5
C MICHIGAN	28.0	MIAMI OHIO	35.5	TEXAS A&M	60.0
CALIFORNIA	42.0	MICHIGAN	60.0	TEXAS ST UNIV	38.0
CHARLOTTE	25.5	MICHIGAN ST	46.5	TEXAS TECH	53.5
CINCINNATI	46.0	MIDDLE TENN ST	25.0	TOLEDO	40.0
CLEMSON	63.5	MINNESOTA	49.5	TROY	35.0
COASTAL CAROLINA	33.5	MISSISSIPPI ST	44.0	TULANE	45.5
COLORADO	47.0	MISSOURI	53.5	TULSA	22.5
COLORADO ST	35.5	MISSOURI ST	23.5	TX-SAN ANTONIO	41.5
CONNECTICUT	38.5	N ILLINOIS	31.0	UAB	27.5
DELAWARE	25.5	NAVY	43.0	UCF	44.5
DUKE	48.0	NC STATE	47.0	UCLA	46.5
E MICHIGAN	27.0	NEBRASKA	53.0	UNLV	43.5
EAST CAROLINA	37.0	NEVADA	27.0	USC	55.5
FLA ATLANTIC	29.5	NEW MEXICO	27.5	UTAH	53.0
FLA INTERNATIONAL	26.0	NEW MEXICO ST	24.0	UTAH ST	29.5
FLORIDA	59.5	NORTH CAROLINA	46.5	UTEP	26.0
FLORIDA ST	50.0	NORTH TEXAS	35.0	VANDERBILT	48.0
FRESNO ST	37.5	NORTHWESTERN	41.0	VIRGINIA	43.0
GA SOUTHERN	37.5	NOTRE DAME	65.5	VIRGINIA TECH	49.0
GEORGIA	68.5	OHIO ST	69.0	W KENTUCKY	35.0
GEORGIA ST	29.0	OHIO U	38.0	W MICHIGAN	28.5
GEORGIA TECH	52.0	OKLAHOMA	58.5	WAKE FOREST	38.0
HAWAII	33.0	OKLAHOMA ST	41.5	WASHINGTON	51.5
HOUSTON	44.5	OLD DOMINION	35.0	WASHINGTON ST	35.0
ILLINOIS	54.5	OLE MISS	63.0	WEST VIRGINIA	43.0
INDIANA	55.0	OREGON	64.0	WISCONSIN	49.5
IOWA	53.0	OREGON ST	39.5	WYOMING	34.0
IOWA ST	51.5	PENN ST	68.0		
JACKSONVILLE ST	31.0	PITTSBURGH	47.5		

AMERICAN
preview

Coverage by
Adam Burke

When we went into the 2024 college football season with an expanded playoff, we all knew that it would create an opportunity for the Group of Five programs to have a seat at the table. What we didn't know was whether or not the American Conference would have a team in the field of 12. Ultimately, the conference did not get included, but Army and Navy both had terrific seasons, as did Memphis and Tulane.

In the wild and crazy world of college football in present day, continuity and loyalty are in short supply. That is not the case for Army or Navy and perhaps had something to do with their 12-2 and 10-3 seasons, respectively. Army also won the American Championship Game over Tulane, though that may pale in comparison to losing the rivalry game to the Middies eight days later.

Even though the Green Wave came up short in their quest for a conference title, expectations remain high for Jon Sumrall's team, even though there is a ton of production to replace on offense. Tulane isn't the only American team lacking headline-grabbers from last season. Seth Henigan's Memphis career is finally over and Army has to replace two 1,000-yard rushers in Bryson Daily and Kanye Udoh, who combined for 42 rushing touchdowns.

Perhaps those losses open the door for UTSA, South Florida, and maybe an outside challenger like East Carolina or North Texas. Five teams that were in the bottom half of the American have new head coaches - Charlotte, FAU, Rice, Temple, and Tulsa. With uncertainty at those programs and a lot of statistical leaders gone from the top teams, the American looks high-variance and ripe for great betting opportunities this season.

2025 projected standings
(BASED ON STEVE MAKINEN RATINGS)

TEAM	2024 SM PR	HOME FA	ROAD FA	SS (RANK)	ALL PRJW'S	ALL PRJL'S	CONF PRJW'S	CONF PRJL'S	DRAFTKINGS O/U
NAVY	43	2.5	0.6	32.19 (116)	8.7	3.3	6.3	1.7	8.5
TULANE	45.5	2.9	0.6	37.47 (72)	8.3	3.7	6.3	1.7	8.5
MEMPHIS	43.5	2.7	-0.1	34.48 (98)	8.5	3.5	5.8	2.2	8.5
ARMY	40.5	2.6	0.5	34.83 (93)	7.6	4.4	5.6	2.4	7.5
TX-SAN ANTONIO	41.5	2.9	0	36.56 (77)	7.6	4.4	5.4	2.6	7.5
SOUTH FLORIDA	41	2.4	-0.2	38.64 (71)	6.7	5.3	5.3	2.7	6.5
EAST CAROLINA	37	2.8	0	34.58 (97)	6.4	5.6	4.5	3.5	6.5
NORTH TEXAS	35	2.7	0.1	31.92 (117)	6.9	5.1	4.2	3.8	6.5
FLA ATLANTIC	29.5	2.2	-0.7	33.95 (103)	4.6	7.4	2.7	5.3	4.5
RICE	28	2.6	-0.4	33.65 (107)	4.1	7.9	2.5	5.5	3.5
UAB	27.5	2.3	-0.6	34.9 (90)	4.1	7.9	2.3	5.7	4.5
TEMPLE	26.5	2.6	-0.9	35.75 (81)	3.6	8.4	2.0	6.0	3.5
CHARLOTTE	25.5	1.5	0	38.98 (70)	2.8	9.2	1.8	6.2	2.5
TULSA	22.5	1.7	-0.1	35.83 (80)	2.4	9.6	1.4	6.6	2.5

ARMY
BLACK KNIGHTS
Head Coach: Jeff Monken (12th)
2024 Record: 12-3 SU & 9-6 ATS, 9-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS
9
OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 5

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/29	TARLETON ST	-17	26
9/6	at Kansas St	+17.2	55
9/20	NORTH TEXAS	-8	35
9/25	at East Carolina	-1.2	37
10/4	at UAB	-11.2	27.5
10/11	CHARLOTTE	-17.6	25.5
10/18	at Tulane	+7.4	45.5
11/1	at Air Force	-3.4	35
11/8	TEMPLE	-17.5	26.5
11/22	TULSA	-20.7	22.5
11/28	at Tx-San Antonio	+3.4	41.5
12/13	vs. Navy	+0.5	43

SOS
34.83
(#93 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/0.5
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+650

MAKE PLAYOFF
12-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	30.2	37	16.2	5
YARDS PER POINT	12.5	17	18.5	4
PLAYS PER GAME	62.3	124		
TIME OF POSSESSION	34:28	1		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	46.6%	12	41.8%	83
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	377.8	68	299.6	8
YARDS PER PLAY	6.1	30	5.3	52
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	54.3	2		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	295.4	1	107.8	11
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.4	12	4.1	52
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	7.5	134		
COMPLETION %	62.2%	52	65.0%	105
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	82.4	134	191.8	25
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	10.9	1	6.7	37
TURNOVERS	0.7	6	1.4	62

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
40.5 CONFERENCE: #6 of 14
NATIONAL: #74 of 136

Army rewrote the record books last season, becoming just the second service academy team to win 12 games in a season (Air Force, 1985) and they also joined a conference for the first time since 2004 and immediately won a conference championship. Usually, the only hardware at stake for the Black Knights has been the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy. Of course, if you asked the players in private, they'd probably trade that American crown for the highly coveted service academy bragging rights.

OFFENSE
As mentioned in the conference overview, there are some programs that have a lot of production to replace and Army is one of them. QB Bryson Daily threw for over 1,000 yards last season and ranks 12th all-time for the program in that department. He also ran for 1,659 yards and had 32 rushing touchdowns. Daily was the first 1,000-yard passer for the program since Kelvin Hopkins Jr. back in 2018.

And Daily, again, a quarterback, was fourth in the nation in rushing yards and first in rushing touchdowns. Not only does Army have to find a way to replace a generational season from a signal caller, but top running back Kanye Udoh is also gone, taking 1,117 yards and 10 rushing scores with him. This is where not being able to utilize the transfer portal is problematic. Option offenses are exclusively about how the QB runs the show and nobody in that position group can do what Daily could. Not only are Daily and Udoh gone, but so are the team's two best offensive tackles.

DEFENSE
Defensively, the Black Knights allowed just 15.5 points per game and actually held opponents under an average of 300 yards per game. But, Army was able to control time of possession in games by moving the chains. The Black Knights faced the 23rd-fewest plays against last season and were the only team in the top 75 to play 14 games. They faced an average of just 56 plays per game against.

The Army offense averaged 34:39.36 of time of possession per CFBStats. The next closest team was Air Force at 33:50.50. So, this defense will get tested more this season without a dominant and efficient offense. And they'll be missing top sack man Elo Modozie, who had 6.5 of the team's 25 sacks. Kyle Lewis is also gone and he had four. The team's leading tacklers, Andon Thomas and Kalib Fortner, are back, but the numbers will undoubtedly decline.

OUTLOOK
Army plays Tulane and UTSA on the road, so those are two tough draws in conference games. The non-conference includes Kansas State and Navy, as that game is still classified as a non-conference matchup. The 7.5 win total for a team that won 12 games last season seems like a very fair number and I believe they'll creep above it, but it will be a struggle.

OVER 7.5 WINS

CHARLOTTE
49ERS

Head Coach: Tim Albin (1st)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 6-6 ATS, 8-4 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

7 OFFENSE: 2
DEFENSE: 5

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/29	vs. Appalachian St	+6.4	33
9/6	NORTH CAROLINA	+19.4	46.5
9/13	MONMOUTH NJ	-4.2	23
9/18	RICE	+0.6	28
10/3	at South Florida	+17.9	41
10/11	at Army	+17.6	40.5
10/18	TEMPLE	-1.4	26.5
10/24	NORTH TEXAS	+8.1	35
11/8	at East Carolina	+14.3	37
11/15	TX-SAN ANTONIO	+14.5	41.5
11/22	at Georgia	+45.6	68.5
11/29	at Tulane	+22.9	45.5

SOS
38.98
(#70 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
1.5/0
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
150-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
200-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	23.4	94	35.9	121
YARDS PER POINT	14.6	73	12.2	120
PLAYS PER GAME	64.5	111		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:43	101		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	31.3%	128	42.9%	94
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	340.5	101	438.5	115
YARDS PER PLAY	5.3	85	6.3	108
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	33.1	96		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	126.5	95	226.3	131
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.8	89	5.5	127
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.9	83		
COMPLETION %	47.2%	131	60.1%	49
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	213.9	79	212.2	48
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.4	61	7.7	87
TURNOVERS	1.6	88	0.8	121

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

25.5 CONFERENCE: #13 of 14
NATIONAL: #127 of 136

The 49ers joined Conference USA in 2015 when they transitioned from FCS to FBS. They joined the American in 2023 as part of a significant conference realignment. In those two seasons, which were led by Biff Poggi, Charlotte went 8-16 and kept their streak of missing a bowl game intact. In a decade as a Division I-A member, Charlotte has one bowl appearance…and they lost by 22 points.

First-year head coach Tim Albin, who was 33-19 at Ohio and ended their MAC Championship drought that dated back to 1968, seems like a promising hire and has a clean slate to work with.

OFFENSE
Two Power Four in-state QBs will fight for the starting gig, as Conner Harrell (UNC) and Grayson Loftis (Duke) could give the program its best QB play in quite some time. There are only two returning starters on offense, but for a team that tied for 100th in points per game and 84th in yards per play, that doesn't seem like a bad thing. New OC Todd Fitch has spent the last four seasons with Ohio State and LSU as an offensive analyst, another promising hire on paper.

Albin prefers a mobile QB and a strong power running game, so we'll see how quickly he can implement that in a conference where physical line play is in short supply. Of course, that's true of the MAC, too, and his Ohio ground game averaged 214 rushing yards per contest last season.

DEFENSE
The Charlotte offense was bad last season, but the defense was worse. This seems like the more problematic side of the ball after giving up over 35 points per game and 6.3 yards per play with just 18 sacks last season. Albin actually left his offensive coordinator in Athens as the new head coach and his defensive coordinator, but brought some of his other top assistants with him on the defensive side.

Like the offense, this is a bit of a blank slate. Five starters are back, including leading tackler Reid Williford, but 17 pass breakups are gone from Al-Ma'hi Ali and Dontae Balfour, plus leading sack man Chantz Williams has also moved on. Still, though, like the offense, the defense has a handful of Power Four transfers and the bar for improvement is rather low.

OUTLOOK
The 49ers have a rough schedule, aside from home games against Monmouth, Rice, and Temple. Of course, they only need to win those three games to get Over 2.5 wins, which does seem doable. But, the margin for error is super limited, in that they're a pretty hefty underdog in every other game. It's an Over pick, but they better win those three.

prediction

OVER 2.5 WINS

EAST CAROLINA
PIRATES

Head Coach: Blake Harrell (1st)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 8-5 ATS, 6-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

6 OFFENSE: 4 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 2

SOS
34.58
(#97 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.8/0
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
18-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
60-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	31.2	33	29.3	86
YARDS PER POINT	13.8	57	14.7	65
PLAYS PER GAME	70.3	52		
TIME OF POSSESSION	25:29	132		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	44.2%	26	42.7%	93
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	430.7	21	429.8	110
YARDS PER PLAY	6.1	24	5.6	74
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.3	66		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	174.5	42	180.8	99
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.8	33	4.4	70
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.4	47		
COMPLETION %	59.6%	82	60.8%	64
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	256.2	36	249	103
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.9	36	7.4	70
TURNOVERS	2	123	1.7	29

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

37.0 CONFERENCE: #7 of 14
NATIONAL: #88 of 136

Those looking for a long shot in the American may want to take a deep dive into the East Carolina roster. Second-year head coach Blake Harrell had a successful first season, as the Pirates went 8-5 and upset in-state Power Four opponent NC State in the Military Bowl as a touchdown pup. Like most G5 programs, ECU has a ton of production to replace, as programs with bigger NIL collectives and more prominent boosters poached the roster.

Harrell actually took over midseason when Mike Houston was fired and led a four-game winning streak before falling in the regular season finale to Navy. He brought in Josh Aldridge to replace him in his old role as DC and second-year OC John David Baker has a lot of intriguing pieces to work with, including a returning starter at QB.

OFFENSE
Michigan State transfer Katin Houser has to hold off Vandy/Mississippi State/Northwestern transfer Mike Wright at QB, but the biggest threat to him is himself. Houser had 18 TD passes and over 2,000 yards, but also threw 11 interceptions in 245 pass attempts. With just one of his top three pass catchers back, Houser will have to develop a rapport with some new guys, including Oklahoma transfer and one-time top-10 WR recruit Jaquaize Pettaway.

Speaking of transfers, Penn State transfer London Montgomery appears most likely to replace 1,100-yard rusher Rahjai Harris and he did have 5.1 yards per pop in 71 rushing attempts. The ceiling for the Pirates could very well be defined by the rebuilt offensive line, which is missing three full-time starters from a unit that improved by 10 sacks allowed, 1.3 yards per carry, and 2.0 yards per play from 2023 to 2024.

DEFENSE
Harrell was the defensive coordinator here from 2020-24. His 2020 unit gave up 35.4 PPG and 6.2 YPP. Since then, the defense has allowed a high of 27.3 PPG and 6.1 YPP, but the defenses the last two seasons have allowed 5.2 and 5.4 YPP, respectively. So, he did his job improving the defense and got to handpick his successor in Aldridge, who was most recently with Auburn.

The offense looks a lot more exciting than the defense at present, as Harrell only has two starters back and a ton of tackles for loss are gone, including 10 from Zakye Barker and 8.5 from Michael Edwards. The ECU offense was also 24th in third-down conversion rate, which helped the defense from getting overexposed. If the Pirates can exceed expectations, it will hinge on how quickly the defense gels.

OUTLOOK
ECU opens the season with a NC State team seeking revenge before facing Campbell, Coastal Carolina, and BYU in non-conference action. Then they play Army and Tulane in their first two American games. That makes it tough to like an Over because they're going to need to reel off a lot of late-season wins to get there.

prediction

UNDER 6.5 WINS

FLORIDA ATLANTIC
OWLS

Head Coach: Zach Kittley (1st)
2024 Record: 3-9 SU & 4-8 ATS, 8-4 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

6 OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 2

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	at Maryland	+15.6	42
9/6	FLORIDA AM	-23.6	8
9/13	at Fla International	-0.7	26
9/27	MEMPHIS	+11.7	43.5
10/4	at Rice	+1.8	28
10/11	UAB	-4.8	27.5
10/18	at South Florida	+14.6	41
10/25	at Navy	+16.7	43
11/8	TULSA	-9.3	22.5
11/15	at Tulane	+19.6	45.5
11/22	CONNECTICUT	+6.5	38.5
11/29	EAST CAROLINA	+5.3	37

SOS
33.95
(#103 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.2/-0.7
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
150-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	24.5	83	32.1	107
YARDS PER POINT	15.6	94	13.8	85
PLAYS PER GAME	69.6	59		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:04	67		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	33.6%	120	38.3%	55
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	381.7	61	442.5	117
YARDS PER PLAY	5.5	71	6.2	106
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.4	48		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	177.5	36	198.4	114
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.8	36	5.1	111
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	29.5	75		
COMPLETION %	58.0%	99	57.8%	27
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	204.2	94	244.2	97
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.9	85	7.8	91
TURNOVERS	1.4	55	1.7	27

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
29.5 CONFERENCE: #9 of 14
NATIONAL: #110 of 136

All three Owls in the American got new head coaches this offseason, but it's easy to say that Zach Kittley is the most interesting of the hires. The 33-year-old Kittley was a student assistant and a graduate assistant at Texas Tech from 2013-17 before immediately getting the offensive coordinator job at Houston Baptist. Three years later, he was the OC at Western Kentucky and then the OC back at his alma mater for the next three years.

The rapid rise for Kittley has included working with Patrick Mahomes and Bailey Zappe and now he has a team of his own, as the FAU program desperately needs a spark. The Owls went 5-4 and made a bowl game in 2020, but haven't had more than five wins since Lane Kiffin's final season in 2019.

OFFENSE
Last season, Texas Tech was seventh in third-down conversion rate at just over 49%, fourth in points per game with 37.6, and 53rd in yards per play with 5.96. The Red Raiders were 14th in passing yards and fifth in pass attempts, so it's clear what the most important position is for the Owls. The boys from Boca Raton collectively posted a 14/11 TD/INT ratio, but starter Cam Fancher is gone, so the bar is low. Conference USA Offensive Player of the Year and WKU transfer Caden Veltkamp knows the Kittley offense.

Veltkamp committed to his hometown Hilltoppers just as Kittley was heading to Texas Tech, so it was Kittley who recruited him. At 6-foot-6 and 236 pounds, he's a big kid and that's a huge help with this type of pass-heavy offense. The receivers, including WKU transfer Easton Messer, look solid and the position with the most returning production is the offensive line.

DEFENSE
Brett Dewhurst is going to have a tough job this season. The Owls only return two starters on defense and they didn't get a ton of high-impact transfers on that side of the ball. If the offense doesn't come together quickly, these Air Raid-style offenses can have quick possessions, thus putting a ton of pressure on the defense. This is Dewhurst's first DC gig after serving as a position coach at Texas Tech, Texas State, and Mississippi State.

Experience is thin on this side of the ball and Dewhurst has predominantly worked with defensive backs, so it wouldn't be surprising to see teams run the rock with a lot of success on the FAU D early on in the season. But, at least this team has the potential to be better and much more exciting to follow.

OUTLOOK
This has all the makings of a transitional year, but the Veltkamp-Messer connection and the style of offense should put that side ahead of the curve, thus making FAU a decent Over bet early in the season. Defensively, it might be a pretty big struggle for a while and the Owls are just 4-12 in American play since making the move prior to the 2023 season.

prediction

UNDER 4.5 WINS

MEMPHIS
TIGERS

Head Coach: Ryan Silverfield (6th)
2024 Record: 11-2 SU & 7-5-1 ATS, 7-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

8
OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 4

SOS
34.48
(#98 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+550

MAKE PLAYOFF
+800

CFP CHAMPION
800-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	35.3	11	25.8	63
YARDS PER POINT	12.8	24	14.9	55
PLAYS PER GAME	74.3	13		
TIME OF POSSESSION	33:43	3		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	45.6%	18	39.9%	72
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	451	10	384.7	70
YARDS PER PLAY	6.1	28	5.9	86
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.2	80		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	183.7	31	115.5	17
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.2	20	4.1	56
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.6	18		
COMPLETION %	63.9%	35	60.1%	52
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	267.3	19	269.2	121
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.1	77	7.5	77
TURNOVERS	0.7	4	1.9	13

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

43.5
CONFERENCE: #2 of 14
NATIONAL: #62 of 136

It might be unfair to say that Ryan Silverfield's seat got hot after 6-6 and 7-6 showings in 2021 and 2022, but those were not the types of performances that met Memphis standards. Well, the team is 21-5 over the last two seasons with bowl wins over Iowa State and West Virginia and the Tigers finished the 2024 campaign 24th in the AP Poll and 23rd in the Coaches' Poll.

Armed with one of the stronger NIL budgets for a Group of Five program, substantial losses of personnel are a little bit easier to overcome. But, the Tigers, who have high hopes and aspirations for this season, still have a lot of new faces from a lot of different places and have to replace a second straight 10,000-yard passer going into 2025.

OFFENSE
It felt like Seth Henigan was going to play at Memphis until the great asteroid hit the Earth and life as we know it ceased to exist. As it turned out, it was just a really long four years, as Henigan ended his college career as the Tigers' all-time leading passer with more than 14,000 yards, usurping Brady White, who had well over 10,000 in three seasons from 2018-20. Not surprisingly, this is the biggest question mark for the Tigers.

But, it is not the only one. Mario Anderson ran for 1,362 yards with 18 rushing scores and backup Brandon Thomas had nine rushing TDs himself. The top five pass catchers, including Anderson, are all gone, with Roc Thomas and Demeer Blankumsee as the most notable names at that position. The offensive line is a mash-up of transfers. This is a tricky job for Silverfield and OC Tim Cramsey.

DEFENSE
Guess what? The losses are very heavy on defense, too, as the Tigers bid adieu to their top eight tacklers and all but two guys with at least 16 tackles last season. Incredibly, even though there were a lot of productive players on this defense, and the team as a whole, DB Kobee Minor was the only Tiger drafted and he was Mr. Irrelevant at No. 257.

The Tigers return very few of their 25 sacks, virtually none of their tackles for loss or pass breakups, and enter the season with a massive rebuilding job for second-year DC Jordon Hankins. Deep pockets and reputation may have helped Memphis bring in a highly-rated transfer portal class, but major question marks are all over the roster.

OUTLOOK
The saving grace this season may very well be the schedule. Memphis gets Tulane, USF, and Navy at home, avoids Army and UTSA, and Arkansas is the only daunting non-conference opponent. Even with the perception of the schedule on paper, not many in the market are buying Memphis and I tend to agree.

prediction

UNDER 8.5 WINS

NAVY
MIDSHIPMEN

Head Coach: Brian Newberry (3rd)
2024 Record: 11-3 SU & 9-4-1 ATS, 9-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

13
OFFENSE: 8 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 5

schedule

SOS
32.19
(#116 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.5/0.6
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+380

MAKE PLAYOFF
10-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	29.8	44	22.3	29
YARDS PER POINT	12.3	13	16.7	12
PLAYS PER GAME	57.8	134		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:51	73		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	35.9%	100	42.4%	91
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	366.8	79	372.3	61
YARDS PER PLAY	6.3	15	5.4	56
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	44.4	6		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	247.2	5	158.9	75
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.6	6	4.3	63
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	12.6	132		
COMPLETION %	58.9%	94	62.5%	83
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	119.7	132	213.4	51
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	9.5	4	7.1	55
TURNOVERS	1	24	1.8	17

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

43.0
CONFERENCE: #3 of 14
NATIONAL: #63 of 136

Navy took the American by storm in 2015 by going 7-1 in conference play and 11-2 overall. The next year, Navy was 9-5 overall, but still 7-2 in league play. Then, the rest of the conference started to adjust. The 2019 season was an outlier, as the Middies went 11-2 overall and 7-1 in league play, but they had been .500 or worse in conference from 2017-23 outside of that lone season.

The Mids were anything but mid last season, as they went 10-3 overall and 6-2 in conference play, and also won the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy with a sweep of Air Force and Army. Third-year head coach Brian Newberry and innovative OC Drew Cronic bring back a ton of talent, as the service academies are largely immune to the transfer portal and I don't think last year's season serves as an outlier like the 2019 one did.

OFFENSE
Unlike their arch-nemesis, Navy returns their QB and top RB. Army has to go into battle on the gridiron without Bryson Daily and Kanye Udoh, but the Middies have Blake Horvath and Alex Tecza. Horvath was outstanding last season with 17 rushing touchdowns and 13 passing touchdowns. While 13 doesn't seem like a big number, it tied a school record and this will be Year 2 of Cronic's offense, which brought more balance to the play calling than we're used to seeing.

Horvath also played through injury late in the season, rallying enough to score a lopsided 31-13 win over Army and then a win over Oklahoma in the Armed Forces Bowl. The multiple looks in Cronic's offense confused opposing defenses, as the Middies only surrendered 11 sacks and had over six yards per play after falling short of five yards per play in each of the previous four seasons.

DEFENSE
Service academy defenses often benefit from the ball control of the offense. In this instance, Navy was +10 in TO margin with 24 takeaways and 17 interceptions. Newberry was the DC and got elevated to head coach and he promoted PJ Volker to DC. Volker has to replace his top three tacklers from last season, but this will be a disciplined unit like always.

Unfortunately, 11 of the 17 interceptions from 2024 are gone, including five from those top tacklers. Navy could be an Over team early in the season with the offense ahead of the defense. It is also worth noting that Navy was +14 in TO margin in American play, which is likely unsustainable for the upcoming season.

OUTLOOK
With the offense virtually intact and a really sharp defensive mind in Newberry at the helm, the hype for Navy is deserved. As the second favorite to win the American and no games against Tulane or UTSA, another good season is in the cards. It also helps that Navy likely starts 7-0 with all their tough games late in the schedule, giving the defense time to come together.

prediction

OVER 8.5 WINS

NORTH TEXAS
MEAN GREEN

Head Coach: Eric Morris (4th)
2024 Record: 6-7 SU & 5-8 ATS, 8-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

14 OFFENSE: 5
DEFENSE: 9

schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	LAMAR	-20.5	17
9/6	at W Michigan	-4.2	28.5
9/13	WASHINGTON ST	-2.3	35
9/20	at Army	+8	40.5
9/27	S ALABAMA	-0.8	37
10/10	SOUTH FLORIDA	+3.1	41
10/18	TX-SAN ANTONIO	+3.8	41.5
10/24	at Charlotte	-8.1	25.5
11/1	NAVY	+5.9	43
11/15	at UAB	-5.3	27.5
11/22	at Rice	-4.5	28
11/29	TEMPLE	-12.1	26.5

SOS
31.92
(#117 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
12-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
50-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	33.4	20	35.3	119
YARDS PER POINT	14.6	74	13.5	88
PLAYS PER GAME	73.3	19		
TIME OF POSSESSION	24:20	134		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	38.4%	79	42.5%	92
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	488.3	4	478.5	128
YARDS PER PLAY	6.7	5	6.2	107
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	29.3	121		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	159.5	67	206.9	117
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.5	11	4.8	101
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	42.9	2		
COMPLETION %	63.5%	39	62.4%	82
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	328.8	4	271.6	123
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.7	43	8.4	114
TURNOVERS	1.5	70	1.3	80

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
35.0 CONFERENCE: #8 of 14
NATIONAL: #92 of 136

A valiant effort from Drew Mestemaker and a depleted roster in the First Responder Bowl against Texas State wasn't enough to get the Mean Green their first winning season since 2017. They've also now lost seven bowl games in a row and are just 2-12 in program history. That makes it really hard to put too many expectations on the Dudes of Denton, but lately it feels like they are just a couple breaks away from breaking through.

The roster has a lot of holdovers, though the biggest contributors from last season on both sides of the ball are gone. Minor improvements in the per-play stats from 2023 to 2024 helped UNT to that sixth win and to a bowl game, but they'll need to trend in that direction again to end the streak of losing seasons and be a long shot factor in the conference.

OFFENSE
Calling Mestemaker's effort "valiant" sort of sells it short. He hadn't played QB since he was a freshman in high school, but threw for 448 yards in the 30-28 loss to Texas State. The Mean Green covered with ease as a 14-point underdog. Mestemaker is on the roster as a QB, but he's likely to sit behind Miami transfer Reese Poffenbarger, who starred at Albany in 2023 before racking up a total of seven pass attempts behind Cam Ward last season.

For the Air Raid offense to function properly, the quarterback is kind of important. So, Eric Morris, who got Chandler Morris (no relation) to transfer in last season, will have another signal caller at the helm and very, very minimal FBS experience at the position. Last season's top three wide receivers are gone, though Makenzie McGill may be an upgrade at running back with six yards per carry and 10 rushing touchdowns last season.

DEFENSE
What's really scary about North Texas is that the offense usually has to carry the team. This is a defense that allowed over 34 points per game and 6.2 yards per play last season. They've only managed 42 sacks in two seasons under Morris, but hope may be on the horizon. Sam Houston State DC Skyler Cassity looks like an excellent hire. The 31-year-old has had top-notch units with the Bearkats and also Abilene Christian in three years as a DC.

Personnel issues may be a hindrance, though. North Texas has been running a 3-3-5 or 3-4 depending on the look and will switch to a four-man front under Cassity. To give you an idea of how badly UNT wanted Cassity, he'll make nearly $450,000 per season, which is pretty extreme for a middling G5 program. Cassity is missing last season's top three tacklers, but he was likely to revamp the defense anyway and returning production from a bad unit doesn't mean a whole lot.

OUTLOOK
North Texas avoids Tulane and Memphis, and road trips to Army, Charlotte, UAB, and Rice aren't all that daunting. I have no doubt that Cassity will improve the defense. If Poffenbarger can grasp the Morris scheme, this is the Mean Green team that will finally get over the hump. With the toughest conference games at home, I'm optimistic.

prediction

OVER 6.5 WINS

RICE
OWLS

Head Coach: Scott Abell (1st)
2024 Record: 4-8 SU & 5-5-2 ATS, 5-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

7 OFFENSE: 3
DEFENSE: 4

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	at La Lafayette	+13.9	38.5
9/6	HOUSTON	+14	44.5
9/13	PRAIRIE VIEW	-29.4	1.5
9/18	at Charlotte	-0.6	25.5
9/27	at Navy	+17.9	43
10/4	FLA ATLANTIC	-1.8	29.5
10/11	at Tx-San Antonio	+16.8	41.5
10/25	CONNECTICUT	+7.6	38.5
10/31	MEMPHIS	+12.8	43.5
11/8	UAB	-3.7	27.5
11/22	NORTH TEXAS	+4.5	35
11/29	at South Florida	+15.8	41

SOS
33.65
(#107 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/-0.4
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
150-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	17.9	125	27.1	74
YARDS PER POINT	18.8	129	13.2	98
PLAYS PER GAME	65.9	94		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:02	93		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	34.8%	109	38.9%	61
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	336.5	105	357.1	49
YARDS PER PLAY	5.1	97	5.1	39
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	24.5	133		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	94.4	124	171.9	92
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.9	86	4.3	66
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	40.5	8		
COMPLETION %	60.7%	71	55.6%	8
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	242.2	45	185.2	18
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6	125	6.7	33
TURNOVERS	1.9	119	0.9	115

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
28.0
CONFERENCE: #10 of 14
NATIONAL: #117 of 136

Scott Abell has taken on the challenge of one of the most difficult jobs in the country. Rice, who shares the city of Houston with the university bearing the same name, should have an embarrassment of riches in the Lone Star State with the quality of high school football across Texas. But, this is a university with stricter academic requirements than most and the second-lowest enrollment in the conference.

Athletics aren't prioritized at Rice to the same degree that they are in other places in Texas, let alone across the country. The Owls have two bowl berths in the last decade, one that they got as a result of their strong APR scores as a five-win team in 2022. They haven't won a bowl game since 2014 and have only had enough wins to technically qualify for one since. Difficult job is an understatement.

OFFENSE
This team is -37 in turnover margin over the last three seasons. Abell, who was the head coach at Davidson and made three FCS Playoff appearances, brought his run game coordinator, Vince Munch, as his OC. That's because Rice is going to run the option. That should at least help the abysmal turnover margin numbers, but this is a massive overhaul to say the least.

Prior to his firing, Mike Bloomgren, who came over from Stanford, probably hoped to prioritize the run more than he did, but the Owls trailed a lot and were forced to go to the air. We'll see how the new regime does with extremely unproven QBs on the roster and a dearth of skill-position talent. Most of last season's top receivers are gone and so is leading rusher Dean Connors, who had 4.9 yards per carry.

DEFENSE
The cupboard is less bare on defense. The Owls rotated a lot of guys in, so leading tackler Ty Morris only had 56 stops, but he's back, along with three of the team's top five tackles. Interestingly, Jon Kay was a holdover from the previous regime, as he was elevated from LB coach to DC. All in all, this was a solid unit last season with 33 sacks and just 5.0 yards per play allowed. Given the lack of help from the offense, that was good.

However, the defense needs to give the offense a boost. The Owls only had 12 takeaways last season, the same number as the 2023 season. Davidson's offense clearly outpaced the defense on Abell's watch, so it may be up to Kay to find more impact plays from his guys.

OUTLOOK
I have long been an advocate of bad teams trying something new and Rice is trying something quite new. But, the American has seen the option with both Navy and Army, who have run it forever and will undoubtedly run it better and more efficiently. I think Year 1 is a brutal one for Abell and the Owls. They also face the five top teams in the American along with Louisiana and Houston.

prediction
UNDER 3.5 WINS

SOUTH FLORIDA
BULLS

Head Coach: Alex Golesh (3rd)
2024 Record: 7-6 SU & 7-6 ATS, 8-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

16
OFFENSE: 8 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	BOISE ST	+7.9	51
9/6	at Florida	+21.3	59.5
9/13	at Miami Fl	+21.2	60
9/20	S CAROLINA ST	-24.5	19
10/3	CHARLOTTE	-17.9	25.5
10/10	at North Texas	-3.1	35
10/18	FLA ATLANTIC	-14.6	29.5
10/25	at Memphis	+5.4	43.5
11/6	TX-SAN ANTONIO	-1.9	41.5
11/15	at Navy	+4.7	43
11/22	at UAB	-11	27.5
11/29	RICE	-15.8	28

SOS
38.64
(#71 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.4/-0.2
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+750

MAKE PLAYOFF
25-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	30.8	34	32	105
YARDS PER POINT	13.3	44	14.4	74
PLAYS PER GAME	74.8	8		
TIME OF POSSESSION	25:21	133		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	37.7%	85	36.0%	35
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	409.1	41	459.4	123
YARDS PER PLAY	5.5	73	5.9	89
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.1	52		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	177	37	167.6	86
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.8	35	4.3	64
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.9	30		
COMPLETION %	59.0%	93	59.4%	43
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	232.1	56	291.8	133
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.6	104	8	98
TURNOVERS	1.5	70	2	8

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

41.0
CONFERENCE: #5 of 14
NATIONAL: #73 of 136

NIL money seems to be flowing in Tampa, as Byrum Brown is back for another season and a couple of Power Four transfers at running back have USF in position to take a much-needed leap. It is Alex Golesh's third year with the Bulls and back-to-back 7-6 campaigns have been acceptable, especially with bowl game wins as underdogs to Syracuse and San Jose State, but it's time to be a factor in the conference again.

With a brutal non-conference schedule and a pretty manageable conference schedule, it might be an ugly start for a retooled roster, but it just might be worth the hard times to get to the finish line. At least that's the hope for a team that hasn't had a winning record in conference play since 2017.

OFFENSE

Golesh is an offensive-minded guy from the esteemed coaching trees of Matt Campbell and Josh Heupel. Last season, he was missing the keys to the proverbial car, as Brown was limited to just 132 pass attempts and five starts. Bryce Archie, who is still on the roster, was undoubtedly a downgrade and had more interceptions (10) than TD passes (9). Brown, who is hoping to be revered when all is said and done like BJ Daniels, Matt Grothe, and Quinton Flowers in a long line of game-changing QBs, simply has to stay healthy.

Cartevious Norton (Iowa State) and Sam Franklin (Oklahoma) are really interesting replacements for Kelley Joiner, Nay'Quan Wright, and Ta'Ron Keith, who combined for 28 rushing touchdowns last season. Arguably, the bigger loss is Sean Atkins, who had 30.2% of the team's receptions and 26.4% of the receiving yards.

DEFENSE

Still, the offense is less of a worry than the defense in my mind. DC Todd Orlando saw mild improvement from this unit last season, going from 6.1 to 5.8 yards per play against and from 32.2 PPG to 29.8 PPG, plus an increase of nine sacks and a +7 turnover margin. Like the offensive side of the spectrum, there are a lot of defensive guys that were originally recruited to Power Four/Five teams that either started here last season or are incoming.

While the base numbers seem okay, the context of them is not. USF is 1-8 against teams with a winning record under Golesh and they were obliterated by some of those teams last season. The defense was torched by Alabama and Miami, which will happen, but Tulane also dropped 45 points. Even Rice had 35 points and 550 yards. UAB had 485 yards in a losing effort. Good performances against Bethune-Cookman and Charlotte skewed the numbers.

OUTLOOK

It is important to keep in mind that USF will start 0-3 against Boise State, Florida, and Miami. So, they'll need to go 7-2 the rest of the way to get you there. It is possible, but they're at North Texas, Memphis, and Navy, and also host UTSA. The talent here is really strong, and among the better teams in the American, but I don't see that type of run.

prediction

UNDER 6.5 WINS

TEMPLE
OWLS

Head Coach: K. C. Keeler (1st)
2024 Record: 3-9 SU & 6-6 ATS, 6-5-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS
10 OFFENSE: 7 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 3

SOS
35.75
(#81 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/-0.9
HOME/ROAD

odds
CONFERENCE
200-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	19.6	117	35.4	120
YARDS PER POINT	15.8	99	11.8	127
PLAYS PER GAME	69.3	62		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:13	60		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	32.1%	126	36.6%	39
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	309.6	123	418.5	101
YARDS PER PLAY	4.5	127	6	97
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	31.9	107		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	93.6	125	226.6	132
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	2.9	131	5.6	129
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.3	31		
COMPLETION %	58.7%	96	59.0%	39
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	216	76	191.9	26
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.3	121	6.9	42
TURNOVERS	2	123	1.3	80

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
26.5 CONFERENCE: #12 of 14
NATIONAL: #123 of 136

The last of the Owls in the American, but like Florida Atlantic and Rice, Temple has a new head coach this season. All things considered, K.C. Keeler looks like a tremendous hire. He's certainly an upgrade from position coach Stan Drayton, who was brought in mostly to tap into recruiting in the Philadelphia area. He went 3-9 in three straight seasons and was shown the door. Rod Carey had a strong display in his first season following Geoff Collins back in 2019, which, coincidentally, is the last time Temple made a bowl game or had a winning record.

Keeler is a winner. Sam Houston State was rough in Year 1 of their FBS transition, but the Bearkats went 10-3 last season. The 65-year-old Keeler is a Philly area native, so this is a homecoming for him in what may very well be his last head coaching spot. He was 97-39 at Sam Houston State, including a National Championship, and 86-52 at Delaware, so he, too, knows how to recruit the area.

OFFENSE
Keeler and his staff have a major mess to clean up. Temple was 129th in yards per play last season on offense and 121st in points per game. Leading passer Evan Simon and leading rusher Terrez Worthy are both back, but they may both be backups to begin the season. Idaho recruit Gevani McCoy transferred to Oregon State and now finds himself across the country in Philly. Jay Ducker, who was with Keeler at Sam Houston, is likely to be atop the depth chart at RB.

The wide receivers are a problem area and the offensive line is in a state of flux, but Keeler has been coaching for more than 40 years and made a solid hire with Montana State's former OC Tyler Walker.

DEFENSE
The formula for being a bad team is pretty simple and Temple checked basically every box, including the turnover margin one. Under Drayton, Temple was -41 in TO margin, including -10 last season. The Owls defense had just five takeaways back in 2023, a number that tripled in 2024, but now they'll start over again on that front.

Former Rice DC Brian Smith has a blank slate. Three starters are back, none of them really of consequence, and he'll be trying to find negative plays. The Owls had just 14 sacks last season and were -23 in sack differential. After allowing 5.5 yards per carry last year and 6.1 yards per play, a blank slate is probably a good thing.

OUTLOOK
Keeler certainly has patience and plenty of experience, two things badly needed in this Temple program. The schedule isn't awful, but those taking Over 3.5 badly need the UMass and Howard games to open the season to even have a shot. I like Keeler, but this is a big rebuilding job.

prediction
UNDER 3.5 WINS

TULANE
GREEN WAVE

Head Coach: Jon Sumrall (2nd)
2024 Record: 9-5 SU & 9-5 ATS, 8-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

13 OFFENSE: 5
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	NORTHWESTERN	-7.7	41
9/6	at S Alabama	-6.1	37
9/13	DUKE	-0.6	48
9/20	at Ole Miss	+19.8	63
9/27	at Tulsa	-21.9	22.5
10/9	EAST CAROLINA	-11.4	37
10/18	ARMY	-7.4	40.5
10/30	at Tx-San Antonio	-1.7	41.5
11/7	at Memphis	+0.1	43.5
11/15	FLA ATLANTIC	-19.6	29.5
11/22	at Temple	-17	26.5
11/29	CHARLOTTE	-22.9	25.5

SOS
37.47
(#72 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.9/0.6
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+300

MAKE PLAYOFF
+750

CFP CHAMPION
500-1

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	33.8	16	22.2	28
YARDS PER POINT	11.8	4	15	50
PLAYS PER GAME	66	93		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:22	15		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	48.8%	5	32.9%	11
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	399.8	46	333.6	26
YARDS PER PLAY	6.1	32	5.2	45
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	40.6	17		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	192.2	24	149.8	59
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.7	38	4.6	84
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	24	120		
COMPLETION %	62.2%	53	58.2%	30
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	207.7	87	183.8	15
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.7	9	6.3	15
TURNOVERS	1.2	35	1.5	45

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

45.5 CONFERENCE: #1 of 14
NATIONAL: #57 of 136

When the announcement about the College Football Playoff expansion came down, Tulane was one of the teams that had a path to being the Group of Five representative. Games against Kansas State and Oklahoma were golden opportunities to get a noteworthy win on top of a conference championship. Well, Tulane lost them both, but still had an outside shot at a playoff spot until losing at home to Memphis just before losing to Army for the American Championship.

It was a disappointing end to what appeared to be a very promising season before it got started. Tulane wound up 9-5 for first-year head coach Jon Sumrall. Like most G5 programs, some key positions need to be filled going into this season. Makhi Hughes and Darian Mensah are the biggest ones, as Tulane heads into the season with a chance at a CFP berth.

OFFENSE
Hughes had over 1,400 rushing yards and 15 touchdowns last season. Mario Williams was a 1,000-yard receiver with 60 grabs, 25 more than anybody else. Good offenses can replace skill guys and Tulane is a good offense with Sumrall and second-year OC Joe Craddock, who held the same role under Sumrall at Troy. There are Power Four transfers ready to step in. Somebody usually finds a way to produce.

What is far less clear is who will fill Mensah's shoes at quarterback. Sumrall has some decent options with Big Ten transfers Brendan Sullivan (Iowa) and Donovan Leary (Illinois), plus Kadin Semonza, who was pretty good for a bad Ball State team last season. Mensah was actually a surprise starter last year, so Sumrall could ride with any of those guys at the outset or recently-acquired Jake Retzlaff from BYU. The offensive line looks quite good again after allowing just 18 sacks last year.

DEFENSE
Evaluating Greg Gasparato's defense is tricky. Tulane gave up 33+ points to Kansas State, Oklahoma, Louisiana, North Texas, Memphis, Army, and Florida. But, they also allowed 10 or fewer points six times. It was a feast or famine unit that feasted on the dregs of the conference and a FCS opponent. The game against Navy was played primarily without Blake Horvath, so that changed the complexion of everything.

The losses on defense are not as substantial as the ones on offense, but Tulane's scoring average of 20.6 PPG and 5.3 YPP were a little bit misleading. Also, of the losses, Tulane did lose two NFL draft picks on the back end, so while most of the front seven is intact, the back seven is an area of emphasis.

OUTLOOK
Tulane plays both UTSA and Memphis on the road in consecutive weeks, so if they win the American, they absolutely will have earned it. They are the favorite, but I'm not sure that they should be. There's plenty of talent on the roster and this may be the team with the highest ceiling, so I'll say Over 8.5 wins, but would not bet it with uncertainty at key positions.

prediction

OVER 8.5 WINS

TULSA
GOLDEN HURRICANE

Head Coach: Tre Lamb (1st)
2024 Record: 3-9 SU & 4-8 ATS, 8-4 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

10 OFFENSE: 5 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 5

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	ABILENE CHRISTIAN	+2.1	26
9/6	at New Mexico St	+4.6	24
9/13	NAVY	+19.4	43
9/19	at Oklahoma St	+21.8	41.5
9/27	TULANE	+21.9	45.5
10/4	at Memphis	+23.8	43.5
10/16	at East Carolina	+17.4	37
10/25	TEMPLE	+1.4	26.5
11/8	at Fla Atlantic	+9.3	29.5
11/15	OREGON ST	+14.8	39.5
11/22	at Army	+20.7	40.5
11/29	UAB	+2.7	27.5

schedule

SOS
35.83
(#80 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
1.7/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
150-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	21.6	105	43.8	133
YARDS PER POINT	17	120	11.9	126
PLAYS PER GAME	76.5	4		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:34	80		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	34.4%	115	44.3%	102
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	368.5	76	522.2	133
YARDS PER PLAY	4.8	113	7.1	134
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.3	50		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	135.5	84	187.6	104
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.6	107	5	105
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37	22		
COMPLETION %	55.3%	116	66.8%	122
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	233.1	53	334.5	134
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.3	120	9.8	134
TURNOVERS	2	123	1.5	54

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

22.5 CONFERENCE: #14 of 14
NATIONAL: #133 of 136

Another reset is in store at Tulsa, the school with the smallest enrollment in the American. The Golden Hurricane have their second coach in three seasons, as Kevin Wilson did not work out and now Tre Lamb takes over the program. Philip Montgomery went 43-53 over his eight seasons, including a 10-3 campaign back in 2016, but that feels like an eternity ago.

If the pattern holds, Tulsa will win just two games this season, going 5-7, 4-8, and 3-9 over the last three seasons. It shouldn't, as Lamb has been a master at turning programs around, as Gardner-Webb improved quickly on his watch and his one season at East Tennessee State was a success at 7-5. That said, you still need players and Lamb doesn't have a lot of them.

OFFENSE
Kirk Francis led the team in completions, pass attempts, yards, and touchdowns last season and seems like he'll hold the job as an incumbent, but Lamb got Baylor Hayes to transfer in from ETSU, so he could be in the mix early and often. Even with some meager NIL funds, there are a handful of Power Four transfers at the skill positions, including Sevion Morrison (Kansas) at RB and Mekhi Miller (Missouri) and Micah Tease (Texas A&M) at WR.

After he was hired, Lamb acknowledged his Air Raid background with the media, but discussed running a spread and even playing with some tempo. He'll serve as his own play caller, though Brad Robbins is the OC. The 35-year-old ruffled some feathers with how quickly he left ETSU and seemed extremely blunt with reporters about Tulsa's position battles and talent level, so we'll see how the team comes together.

DEFENSE
Lamb brought his Buccaneers and Bulldogs DC, Josh Reardon, with him to red dirt country. The offense wasn't very good last season, but the defense was objectively horrendous. Tulsa allowed over 42 points per game and more than seven yards per play. They were 134th out of 134 teams in yards per play allowed and 133rd out of 134 in scoring defense. Good luck running tempo, coach!

The team's top three players in tackles for loss all left. This is a group that generated just 19 sacks and most of those are out the door as well. It wasn't quite as bad as it ended up last season, as the team quit on Wilson and gave up 223 points and 8.2 YPP over the final four games. But, Tulsa still hasn't had a good defense since the 2020 season and it will take a lot to have one this year.

OUTLOOK
Lamb seems to have very high expectations right away in Year 1. As he should. ETSU went 7-5 with four losses by 19 combined points to FCS opponents and a loss to Appalachian State. It's not like they were a good team before he got there. So, we'll see. The win total hinges on upsets, as Tulsa will only be favored twice as of now.

prediction

UNDER 2.5 WINS

UTSA
ROADRUNNERS

Head Coach: Jeff Traylor (6th)
2024 Record: 7-6 SU & ATS, 8-4-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

11 OFFENSE: 9 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 2

schedule

SOS
36.56
(#77 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.9/0
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+450

MAKE PLAYOFF
14-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	32.2	30	32	105
YARDS PER POINT	13.8	60	12.3	118
PLAYS PER GAME	78.5	2		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:39	43		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	38.7%	77	31.4%	6
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	445.5	11	392.3	77
YARDS PER PLAY	5.7	57	5.5	66
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.6	61		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	160.7	64	114.8	16
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.4	59	3.2	11
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	39.7	10		
COMPLETION %	61.8%	63	58.6%	33
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	284.8	11	277.4	126
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.2	72	8.5	117
TURNOVERS	1.7	99	1.7	29

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

41.5 CONFERENCE: #4 of 14
NATIONAL: #71 of 136

Jeff Traylor took over the UTSA football program in 2020, which was a pretty tough time to take over a team. Traylor immediately raised the bar with a 7-5 season and then nearly put the bar out of reach with a 12-2 follow-up. In all, Traylor has stellar records at home and late in the season when he has everything precisely where he wants it with his roster. After all, this was a team that had only beaten Kennesaw State and Houston Christian before winning four of their final six games.

But, last year's UTSA team wasn't buttoned up. Their 46-45 loss to Tulsa was proof of that, as the Roadrunners led 35-7 at halftime and 42-24 after three quarters. Tulsa scored 14 points in the final 2:26 and that was a terrible Golden Hurricane team. It was also as clear of a sign as possible to get better players on defense and Traylor did exactly that.

OFFENSE
Before we get to the rebuilt defense, which only returns two starters, let's look at the offense because it could be what separates the Roadrunners from the rest of the American. Owen McCown is back after throwing for over 3,400 yards and the Roadrunners also return their top two rushers and nearly all of their top receivers. So many other teams, especially near the top of the odds board, have to replace key pieces and parts on offense. UTSA does not.

This was a group that scored over 30 points per game on the whole and 37 PPG in conference action with over six yards per play. Early-season drubbings by Texas State and Texas hurt the greater sample size, but UTSA was very strong in conference play and should be yet again.

DEFENSE
The defense really faltered last season. Traylor gave a vote of confidence to DC Jess Loepp and the program hit the portal very hard. Jimmori Robinson (10.5 sacks) and Martavius French (16 TFL) are two immense losses, but the rest of the defense was pretty pedestrian on the whole. With 88 sacks over the last two seasons, Loepp knows how to find pass rushers and pressure opposing quarterbacks.

Loepp's defenses have mostly been very stout against the run, but the pass has presented some problems in terms of coverage breakdowns and big plays. Zah Frazier (6 INT) is a big loss, but the portal has provided a lot more depth for the Roadrunners, who were less active in trying to improve last year on this side of the ball.

OUTLOOK
This should be the favorite to win the American. UTSA avoids Memphis and Navy, gets Tulane at home, and probably has the conference's top QB. UTSA just didn't finish games last year, blowing fourth-quarter leads against Tulsa, Army, and Rice (with four seconds left). They're deeper and better this year.

prediction

OVER 7.5 WINS

UAB
BLAZERS

Head Coach: Trent Dilfer (4th)
2024 Record: 3-9 SU & 5-7 ATS, 7-4-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

8
OFFENSE: 4 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 4

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

27.5 CONFERENCE: #11 of 14
NATIONAL: #120 of 136

It is hard to believe that it was a decade ago when UAB players, coaches, boosters, and the community were forced to rally together to save the football program. Bill Clark was hired in 2014 and stuck it out through two years of not playing games, only to be one of the nation's best stories for the next five seasons with a 43-20 record.

OC Bryant Vincent took over when Clark stepped aside due to medical issues in 2022 and led a 7-6 season with the interim tag. UAB then opted to go in a different direction despite lots of player support for Vincent. Trent Dilfer is 7-17 in two seasons and opens the 2025 season on one of the hottest seats in the country, as this looks like a failed experiment and something that turned a Group of Five stalwart into merely an afterthought.

OFFENSE
It isn't like Dilfer doesn't know ball. As we all know, he played 17 years across college and the NFL and then became an analyst before becoming the head coach at Lipscomb Academy in Tennessee. He was 44-10 there, but college football is a little bit different. The defense stands out as being worse on paper, but this is an inexplosive, vanilla offense. QB Jacob Zeno was second in the nation in completion percentage among QBs with at least 55 pass attempts in 2023. UAB was just 51st in points per game.

Last season, Florida transfer Jalen Kitna got more of the work and posted a 17/11 TD/INT ratio with a 62% completion rate. He's a big pocket presence at 6-foot-4 and 220 pounds and was a top-40 recruit at his position coming out of high school. But, his top two WR are gone now and UAB doesn't have a lot of size there. The top two rushers are also gone. So are most of the experienced offensive linemen.

DEFENSE
In an effort to fix the defense - and probably save his job - Dilfer tabbed former Air Force DC Steve Russ to run that beleaguered unit. UAB has allowed 36.9 and 34.3 PPG in the Dilfer era and went from 21 takeaways down to just 13. It is worth pointing out that Tulane scored 71 points on UAB in a game last season, so the stats don't seem quite as bad if you consider that outrageous outlier.

Still, there isn't a lot to build from here, as only two guys with at least 30 tackles are back. Of course, with a defense that poor, returning production is kind of an oxymoron, unless there was a major standout or two. There really wasn't one, so Russ has basically a brand new defense to whip into shape.

OUTLOOK
Dilfer keeping this job might take a minor miracle, especially because the "easiest" games on paper for UAB are all on the road at UConn, Rice, and Tulsa. Even though a 2-1 start is possible, finding three more wins on the schedule is an arduous task and the second bye is well-timed to let Dilfer go.

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	ALABAMA ST	-22	8
9/6	at Navy	+18.6	43
9/13	AKRON	-5	25
9/20	at Tennessee	+35.8	59.5
10/4	ARMY	+11.2	40.5
10/11	at Fla Atlantic	+4.8	29.5
10/18	MEMPHIS	+13.6	43.5
11/1	at Connecticut	+14.5	38.5
11/8	at Rice	+3.7	28
11/15	NORTH TEXAS	+5.3	35
11/22	SOUTH FLORIDA	+11	41
11/29	at Tulsa	-2.7	22.5

SOS
34.90
(#90 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.3/-0.6
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
150-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	24.8	81	37.1	125
YARDS PER POINT	15.4	92	11.1	132
PLAYS PER GAME	71.1	38		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:19	86		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	37.3%	88	42.4%	89
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	381.3	64	413.5	100
YARDS PER PLAY	5.4	79	5.9	87
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.7	112		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	115.5	109	222.2	126
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.8	95	5.3	116
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.6	16		
COMPLETION %	63.0%	44	55.7%	10
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	265.8	20	191.3	24
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.1	79	7.1	54
TURNOVERS	2.1	128	1	108

UNDER 4.5 WINS

ACC preview

Coverage by
Zach Cohen

Last year, in their first season in the conference, the SMU Mustangs finished with the best record in the ACC and went to the College Football Playoff. For most of the year, it looked like the Miami Hurricanes would represent the conference, as the team started 9-0 and had a manageable schedule down the stretch. However, Mario Cristobal's team folded, failing to even make the ACC Championship Game. Instead, it was Dabo Swinney's Clemson Tigers that played in that game, and the group ended up winning it. A lot of that had to do with Cade Klubnik throwing for 262 yards with four touchdowns and no picks.

Klubnik is back to lead Clemson this season, and he's one of the favorites to win the Heisman Trophy. The Tigers also return more production than any team in college football, which is why they're sitting atop the oddsboard as they look to go back-to-back in the ACC.

Once again, Miami, with some of the fattest pockets in college football, will be looking to challenge Clemson. The Hurricanes are second on the oddsboard. SMU, which nearly got the job done last year, is third. The Mustangs will need to hope that last year's defense (seventh in yards per play allowed) shows up again — and possibly improves — and Rhett Lashlee is definitely hoping Kevin Jennings can continue his ascension at quarterback.

After the big dogs, Louisville and Georgia Tech are viewed as the most legitimate threats when talking about party-crashers. Though you can rule out Virginia Tech, Florida State and North Carolina at your own peril. There are reasons to believe in all three bouncing back this season. In Chapel Hill, the reason is Jordon Hudson's boyfriend, Bill Belichick, who happens to be pretty accomplished as a football coach.

The rest of the conference is filled with teams that are either short on talent or early in the process of rebuilding. Though I'll admit, I'm excited to watch Captain Andrew Luck, Stanford's GM, navigate some rough waters this year.

2025 projected standings

(BASED ON STEVE MAKINEN RATINGS)

TEAM	2024 SM PR	HOME FA	ROAD FA	SS (RANK)	ALL PRJW'S	ALL PRJL'S	CONF PRJW'S	CONF PRJL'S	DRAFTKINGS O/U
CLEMSON	63.5	2.5	-0.1	46.71 (32)	9.8	2.2	6.7	1.4	9.5
MIAMI FL	60	2	0.3	45.32 (40)	9.1	2.9	6.2	1.8	9.5
SMU	55.5	3.3	-0.2	43.33 (58)	8.6	3.4	5.4	2.6	8.5
GEORGIA TECH	52	2	0.4	44.59 (50)	7.5	4.5	4.8	3.2	7.5
LOUISVILLE	54	3.3	-0.3	44.27 (52)	8.2	3.8	4.6	3.4	8.5
FLORIDA ST	50	2.3	0.1	44.19 (53)	6.7	5.3	4.4	3.6	6.5
NORTH CAROLINA	46.5	2.3	-0.1	42.75 (62)	7.0	5.0	4.2	3.8	7.5
DUKE	48	2.9	-0.2	44.79 (48)	6.8	5.2	4.2	3.8	6.5
VIRGINIA TECH	49	2.6	-0.1	44.06 (54)	6.9	5.1	4.1	3.9	6.5
PITTSBURGH	47.5	2.7	0.1	44.79 (49)	6.3	5.7	3.7	4.3	6.5
NC STATE	47	2.9	-0.2	45.13 (45)	6.2	5.8	3.7	4.3	6.5
VIRGINIA	43	2.1	0.1	41.52 (67)	6.2	5.8	3.4	4.6	6.5
BOSTON COLLEGE	46.5	2.2	-0.2	46.13 (35)	5.5	6.5	3.2	4.8	5.5
SYRACUSE	46.5	2.6	-0.2	48.39 (18)	5.0	7.0	2.9	5.1	5.5
CALIFORNIA	42	2.5	-0.1	41.6 (64)	5.4	6.6	2.8	5.2	5.5
STANFORD	38	1.7	-0.3	48.64 (17)	3.1	8.9	1.8	6.2	3.5
WAKE FOREST	38	2.3	0.1	41.58 (65)	4.8	7.2	1.7	6.3	4.5

BOSTON COLLEGE
EAGLES

Head Coach: Bill O'Brien (2nd)
2024 Record: 7-6 SU & 8-5 ATS, 7-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

11 OFFENSE: 5
DEFENSE: 6

schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	FORDHAM	-43.4	5.5
9/6	at Michigan St	+2.5	46.5
9/13	at Stanford	-6.6	38
9/27	CALIFORNIA	-6.8	42
10/4	at Pittsburgh	+3.9	47.5
10/11	CLEMSON	+14.7	63.5
10/18	CONNECTICUT	-10.5	38.5
10/25	at Louisville	+11	54
11/1	NOTRE DAME	+17.6	65.5
11/8	SMU	+6.6	55.5
11/15	GEORGIA TECH	+3.7	52
11/29	at Syracuse	+2.8	46.5

SOS
46.13
(#35 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.2/-0.2
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
80-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
25-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	25.8	73	25.8	62
YARDS PER POINT	13.5	47	14.8	59
PLAYS PER GAME	69.3	65		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:51	24		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	43.2%	32	38.7%	59
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	349.3	96	380	66
YARDS PER PLAY	5	100	5.5	69
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	40.3	21		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	154.8	71	119.7	25
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.8	87	3.8	34
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	26.4	108		
COMPLETION %	61.8%	62	62.5%	84
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	194.5	100	260.3	117
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.4	62	7.5	74
TURNOVERS	1.3	46	1.9	13

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

46.5 CONFERENCE: #12 of 17
NATIONAL: #52 of 136

Bill O'Brien went 7-6 in his first season in Chestnut Hill, and his team ended up losing a close game against Nebraska in the Pinstripe Bowl. All in all, it was a successful first year for a proven winner, and Year 2 has the potential to be even better.

If you include transfers, the Eagles depth chart will feature 13 players that started last season. There's talent at the quarterback position, the running back room is loaded and the offensive line is supposed to be decent. That should be enough for O'Brien to cook with. The defense is also loaded in the secondary.

The big issue is the schedule. BC will face Clemson, Notre Dame and SMU this year, and there's some other tough ones in there. Are the Eagles up for that?

OFFENSE

Thomas Castellanos is now at Florida State, but Boston College is in decent shape at this spot. Grayson James, another running threat, got some experience down the stretch last year. O'Brien also added Dylan Lonergan, a former four-star that went to Alabama, in the transfer portal.

If the offensive line, which only returns two returning starters, holds up, the Eagles should be solid in the passing game. And the early reports about the group up front are strong. That's also big for an insanely talented group of running backs. Jordan McDonald rushed for 6.8 yards per carry last year, and he should thrive in a bigger role. Also, Turbo Richard looked like a future star in limited action last season. The receivers, led by Lewis Bond, are a bit stronger as a collective.

Boston College could improve on last year's 5.67 YPP, and a bump in Rush EPA per play (-0.04 in '24) should be expected.

DEFENSE

It's probably hard to be optimistic about this unit, as Donovan Ezeiruaku, who had 16.5 sacks last season, and Cam Horsley, another stud up front, are gone. And the Eagles were just 76th in YPP allowed (5.91) last season. However, they had a negative Dropback EPA per play allowed (-0.02) in 2024, and they're expected to have one of the best secondaries in the conference this year.

They also brought in three FCS starters along the D-Line and the linebacker group is expected to be a strength, especially with Daveon "Bam" Crouch, a star in the making, back in the mix.

OUTLOOK

I'll bite on the Over on BC's low win total. Home games against Fordham, Cal, UConn and Georgia Tech are all very winnable, and I trust the Eagles to do enough with road games at Michigan State, Stanford, Pittsburgh and Syracuse to get Over the line. O'Brien always gets the most out of his talent, and while there's not a lot of continuity here, he has plenty of ball-players.

prediction

OVER 5.5 WINS

CALIFORNIA
GOLDEN BEARS

Head Coach: Justin Wilcox (9th)
2024 Record: 6-7 SU & ATS, 3-8-2 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

14 OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	at Oregon St	+1.1	39.5
9/6	TEXAS SOUTHERN	-46.2	-1.5
9/13	MINNESOTA	+5.1	49.5
9/20	at San Diego St	-9.1	30.5
9/27	at Boston College	+6.8	46.5
10/4	DUKE	+3.3	48
10/17	NORTH CAROLINA	+1.9	46.5
10/24	at Virginia Tech	+9.7	49
11/1	VIRGINIA	-1.4	43
11/8	at Louisville	+15.4	54
11/22	at Stanford	-2.2	38
11/29	SMU	+10.8	55.5

SOS
41.60
(#64 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.5/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
150-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
40-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	24.6	82	23.1	36
YARDS PER POINT	15.8	98	14.7	60
PLAYS PER GAME	70.9	41		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:39	44		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	38.7%	78	33.3%	15
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	388.4	56	340.3	33
YARDS PER PLAY	5.5	72	5	27
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	33.8	94		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	123.2	100	112.1	13
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.6	105	3.3	14
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	33.1	41		
COMPLETION %	71.5%	6	60.3%	57
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	265.3	22	228.2	71
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8	32	7.3	66
TURNOVERS	0.8	16	1.3	80

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

42.0 CONFERENCE: #15 of 17
NATIONAL: #69 of 136

While the Golden Bears have an easy schedule, they also lost quarterback Fernando Mendoza, who masked a lot of last year's deficiencies, to Indiana. There's also a weird internal struggle going on, as the team appointed "Riverboat" Ron Rivera as the program's new GM. On the surface, that's a harmless move, but head coach Justin Wilcox has to report directly to him. That's a little awkward for a coach that probably wouldn't be on the market long if he were to become available.

Perhaps it will all work out fine. After all, Cal was 33rd in YPP allowed (5.33) in 2024, and the team has eight starters returning from that strong defensive unit. So, if the Bears get some decent play at quarterback, there's a little hope.

OFFENSE

Mendoza didn't get enough love when he was actually at Cal, but he's getting some first-round buzz for the 2026 NFL Draft now that people have really grinded his tape. That said, losing that type of player is going to be detrimental to this offense, which only averaged 5.89 YPP last season.

The starter will likely be transfer Devin Brown, once a four-star recruit. Brown never panned out at Ohio State, but there's some talent here. Perhaps new offensive coordinator Bryan Harsin can get something out of him. If not, it'll be talented true freshman Jaron-Keawe Sagapolutele under center.

For whoever starts, the offensive line should be strong. The Golden Bears have two starters back from last year, plus they added five starters in the transfer portal. That should also help the running backs, but it isn't the strongest group in the world after star Jaydn Ott left for Oklahoma. Cal also has a lousy wide receiver room.

DEFENSE

Corners Nohl Williams, an All-American last year, and Marcus Harris are now in the NFL. But California is generally solid on defense every year, as Wilcox is a defensive-minded coach — he was once an elite defensive coordinator — and he's good at identifying, and developing, talent. He should find a way to patch up the secondary.

The Bears also have a loaded front seven, and linebacker Cade Uluave should be one of the best players in the ACC, if he can stay healthy. The rest of the linebacking corps is solid. So, this should be a good group overall.

OUTLOOK

An above-average defense and solid offensive line can go a long way, and the Golden Bears do have a favorable schedule. However, I'm not sold on this team having enough offensive talent to consistently win games. And the situation with Wilcox and Rivera is a little odd. Somebody in the ACC is going to have to be a punching bag, and I wouldn't be shocked if it's the team located in Berkeley.

prediction

UNDER 5.5 WINS

CLEMSON
TIGERS

Head Coach: Dabo Swinney (18th)
2024 Record: 10-4 SU & 6-8 ATS, 6-7-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

17 OFFENSE: 8 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 9

SOS
46.71
(#32 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.5/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+105

MAKE PLAYOFF
-200

CFP CHAMPION
10-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	33.5	19	24.2	47
YARDS PER POINT	13.3	43	15.4	29
PLAYS PER GAME	74.5	11		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:59	40		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	43.4%	31	35.4%	32
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	443.8	12	373.2	62
YARDS PER PLAY	6	40	5.3	54
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.2	90		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	163.8	56	150.8	60
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.8	34	4.6	90
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38.5	12		
COMPLETION %	62.5%	48	57.0%	14
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	279.9	12	222.3	66
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.3	66	6.3	20
TURNOVERS	0.7	6	1.8	16

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

63.5 CONFERENCE: #1 of 17
NATIONAL: #8 of 136

Dabo Swinney has won two national titles and nine ACC championships with Clemson. This year, the Tigers are expected to flirt with that type of glory again.

Last season, Clemson snuck into the College Football Playoff with a win over SMU in the ACC Championship Game. The team ultimately lost to Texas in the first round, but we saw some star-making performances from Heisman hopeful Cade Klubnik late in the year, and he's one of 17 returning starters for the Tigers.

Clemson's statistical profile wasn't that impressive a year ago, but this was a young team that brings back 80% of its production. Another year of seasoning could make for a special season in South Carolina.

OFFENSE
Clemson was just 44th in the nation in YPP (6.30) last season, but it does feel like the team found something late in the year. Klubnik threw for 262 yards with four touchdowns and no picks against SMU in the ACC Championship Game, and he also threw for 336 yards with three touchdowns against Texas in the CFP. That second game wasn't perfect for the Tigers, but Klubnik stood out with his ability to make big throws in the face of pressure.

The Garrett Riley experience hasn't always been smooth in Clemson, but he found his touch as a play caller last year. Riley can now let loose and open things up knowing that this is the most loaded Tigers offense he has worked with.

Clemson has one of the best offensive lines in the nation, running back Davidson Gideon has juice out of the backfield and Klubnik will have absolute studs at wide receiver in Antonio Williams, TJ Moore and Bryant Wesco.

DEFENSE
Clemson's defense wasn't the same under Wes Goodwin as it was under Brent Venables, and last year was a tipping point for Swinney. The Tigers were outside the top 50 in both YPP allowed (5.73) and EPA per play allowed (-0.02). That was unacceptable given the talent, and new defensive coordinator Tom Allen will look to patch things up.

Allen's job should be easy. The Tigers are stacked at every level of the defense, as they have talented starters returning and some big-time portal additions in the mix. Defensive tackle Peter Woods might be the best player in football this year, and defensive end TJ Parker and corner Aveion Terrell are stars.

OUTLOOK
Clemson's schedule is extremely tough. It all starts with a meeting with LSU, and road games against Georgia Tech, North Carolina, Louisville and South Carolina will all be challenging. There's also a home game against SMU. But I'm going Over. The Tigers are stacked with NFL talent, have an elite quarterback and have improved the coaching staff.

prediction

OVER 9.5 WINS

DUKE
BLUE DEVILS

Head Coach: Manny Diaz (2nd)
2024 Record: 9-4 SU & 8-4-1 ATS, 6-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

12 OFFENSE: 5
DEFENSE: 7

SOS
44.79
(#48 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.9/-0.2
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
25-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
14-1

CFP CHAMPION
300-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	26.3	71	26.3	66
YARDS PER POINT	12.7	23	14.5	71
PLAYS PER GAME	66.1	91		
TIME OF POSSESSION	27:20	120		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	28.7%	129	35.0%	29
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	335.7	106	381.7	68
YARDS PER PLAY	5.1	98	5	28
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	29.5	118		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	95.3	123	159.6	77
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.2	121	4	49
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.6	27		
COMPLETION %	59.5%	85	57.5%	20
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	240.4	47	222.1	65
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.8	96	6.7	35
TURNOVERS	1.5	70	2.3	2

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

48.0 CONFERENCE: #8 of 17
NATIONAL: #46 of 136

Duke was dealt a blow with Mike Elko leaving for Texas A&M two years ago, but Manny Diaz looks like he's up for the challenge of winning in Durham. In Diaz's first year in charge, the Blue Devils went 9-3 during the regular season. And while their season did end with a 52-20 loss to Ole Miss, Duke's momentum carried over into the offseason, as the Blue Devils landed star Tulane transfer Darian Mensah to man the quarterback position.

If Mensah makes a little jump in his sophomore season, Duke is going to be a problem for the rest of the ACC. Seven starters are back from a defense that was eighth in the nation in EPA per play allowed (-0.13) in 2024, and Diaz likely won't let that unit slip outside of the top 20.

OFFENSE
Mensah threw for 2,723 yards with 22 touchdowns and six picks for a good Tulane team last year. He was the leader and engine of a Green Wave offense that was top 10 in EPA per play (0.17) and 21st in YPP (6.70).

Mensah is a good decision maker with the football, and he can also make every throw in the book. He's ready for the jump from the AAC to the ACC, and he's going to be playing behind a line that has four starters back from last season.

Duke also has an explosive running back in Jaquez Moore. The Blue Devils just need to hope that an unproven group of pass catchers can give Mensah the support he needs.

DEFENSE
The secondary could be the strength of this team, and that's always a good thing. Preventing big plays is the name of the game, and corner Chandler Rivers, a first-team All-ACC performer, and safety Terry Moore, a second-teamer that will miss a few games to start the year, will play a role in doing that.

The Blue Devils will also be hoping to be as strong against the run this year as they were last year. Duke finished 12th in the nation in Rush EPA per play allowed (-0.11), and three starters return along the line.

Duke also has defensive ends Vincent Anthony Jr. and Wesley Williams back to put pressure on quarterbacks, and the linebacking corps is solid.

OUTLOOK
The Over on Duke's 6.5-win total is heavily juiced, but it's still hard to lay off that play. Between home games against Elon, Illinois, NC State, Georgia Tech, Virginia and Wake Forest and road games against Tulane, Syracuse, Cal, UConn and North Carolina, how can you not like the Blue Devils to win seven games? I count four gimmes in there, plus enough 50-50s to put trust in Mensah and this defense.

prediction
OVER 6.5 WINS

FLORIDA STATE
SEMINOLES

Head Coach: Mike Norvell (6th)
2024 Record: 2-10 SU & 4-8 ATS, 3-9 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

15 OFFENSE: 7
DEFENSE: 8

SOS
44.19
(#53 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.3/0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
28-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
14-1

CFP CHAMPION
250-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	13.1	133	29.9	91
YARDS PER POINT	19.6	130	13.2	97
PLAYS PER GAME	65.6	97		
TIME OF POSSESSION	27:12	121		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	26.7%	132	45.3%	111
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	257.1	132	396	84
YARDS PER PLAY	3.9	133	5.7	76
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	31.3	109		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	82.2	132	196.3	111
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	2.6	132	4.8	98
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.2	69		
COMPLETION %	49.1%	130	61.9%	76
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	174.9	114	199.7	36
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	5.8	127	7.5	75
TURNOVERS	2	123	0.4	133

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

50.0 CONFERENCE: #6 of 17
NATIONAL: #38 of 136

What happened in Tallahassee last season was absolutely stunning. The year started with Nick Saban attending one of their practices and declaring them as "one of the best teams in the country." Then, Florida State went to Ireland and got upset by Georgia Tech. At that point, many were wondering whether or not it was a fluke. It wasn't.

The Seminoles followed up the Week 0 dud with home losses against Boston College and Memphis. Ultimately, Mike Norvell's group went 2-10 and the wins came against Cal and Charleston Southern. To make matters worse, Florida State's final game of the year was a 31-11 loss to rival Florida.

This year should be different. Norvell has completely revamped the roster, and the potential is there for a quick turnaround — and possibly contention in the ACC. But expectations were high last season, too.

OFFENSE
DJ Uiagalelei was good at Oregon State in 2023, so there were reasons to believe he'd thrive in Norvell's offense. Well, that didn't happen. The former Clemson quarterback was benched in the fourth quarter of a blowout loss to SMU, and he later decided to get surgery on his throwing hand. All in all, the quarterback situation was a nightmare, the offensive line was a mess and the team never got going.

Thomas Castellanos should be a huge upgrade under center. He's an electric runner, making for a perfect fit in new offensive coordinator Gus Malzahn's offense. Castellanos actually signed to play for Malzahn at UCF in 2022.

FSU has a ton of playmakers in the backfield, plus an improved offensive line. The Seminoles also have some pass-catching talent — especially at tight end.

DEFENSE
Eight starters are back on defense for Florida State. That might not sound great with the team having finished outside the top 100 in EPA per play allowed (0.07), but last year really feels like a complete throwaway season.

The Noles have talent scattered across every part of the defense. Corner Jeremiah Wilson and defensive tackle Darrell Jackson Jr. are two of the standouts.

Defensive coordinator Tony White should bring the unit back to respectability. That should be enough with the improvement coming on offense.

OUTLOOK
The season will probably start with a loss to Alabama, but I wouldn't be stunned if Florida State is 7-1 after eight weeks. This is one of my favorite Overs heading into the season, as this is a buy-low opportunity for a team with outrageous potential. Just two years ago, the Seminoles went 13-1, winning double-digit games for the second year in a row. Norvell didn't just suddenly forget how to coach.

prediction

OVER 6.5 WINS

GEORGIA TECH
YELLOW JACKETS

Head Coach: Brent Key (4th)
2024 Record: 7-6 SU & 6-6-1 ATS, 5-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

14
OFFENSE: 7 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 7

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/29	at Colorado	-2.8	47
9/6	GARDNER WEBB	-42.7	11
9/13	CLEMSON	+9.4	63.5
9/20	TEMPLE	-28.4	26.5
9/27	at Wake Forest	-12.1	38
10/11	VIRGINIA TECH	-5.1	49
10/18	at Duke	-1.5	48
10/25	SYRACUSE	-7.7	46.5
11/1	at Nc State	-2.5	47
11/15	at Boston College	-3.7	46.5
11/22	PITTSBURGH	-6.4	47.5
11/28	vs. Georgia	+14.6	68.5

SOS
44.59
(#50 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2/0.4
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
12-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+500

CFP CHAMPION
150-1

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	26.4	69	27.2	75
YARDS PER POINT	15.6	96	13.4	91
PLAYS PER GAME	67.8	76		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:28	27		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	40.7%	56	35.8%	34
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	412.3	35	364.8	54
YARDS PER PLAY	6.1	27	6	98
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38.1	39		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	186.8	26	133.3	34
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.9	29	4.5	80
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.9	81		
COMPLETION %	70.9%	10	66.5%	119
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	225.5	61	231.4	78
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.8	38	7.7	86
TURNOVERS	0.8	16	0.8	120

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

52.0 CONFERENCE: #5 of 17
NATIONAL: #32 of 136

Brent Key has put together back-to-back winning seasons with Georgia Tech, and he's hoping for a bit of a breakthrough this year. Georgia Tech is usually good for an upset or two every year, with last year's wins over Florida State and Miami being the big ones. The team also lost to Georgia in a game that went to eight overtimes.

With Haynes King and Jamal Haynes back to lead this offense, plus seven starters returning for a defense that was much better in 2024 than 2023, the Yellow Jackets are looking to go from hunters to hunted.

Anything less than eight wins will be viewed as a disappointment this year, so things are about to heat up in Atlanta.

OFFENSE
It wasn't long ago that King was viewed as a disappointment at Texas A&M. He was a highly-regarded recruit out of Longview High School, but it didn't work out in College Station. Now, after throwing for 2,114 yards with 14 touchdowns and only two picks, and rushing for 587 yards and 11 scores, in 2024, King is considered one of the best dual-threat quarterbacks in the country.

Haynes, who rushed for 944 yards and nine scores last year, is also insanely talented out of the backfield.

The issue with the Yellow Jackets is that the offensive line is a little shaky. Also, outside of Malik Rutherford, they're a little light on pass catchers.

This team was top 25 in adjusted EPA per play (0.09) last year, but they could drop a little there.

DEFENSE
Last year was a huge step in the right direction for Georgia Tech on this side of the ball, but defensive coordinator Tyler Santucci left to be a LB coach for the Baltimore Ravens. So, while the Yellow Jackets do return a good amount of talent, there's some uncertainty heading into the year.

New defensive coordinator Blake Gideon, who has coached safeties for Texas since 2021, is going to install more of a bend-don't-break zone. Georgia Tech was good against the run in 2024, but the team needs to prevent big throws over the top. I have some doubts given the personnel in the secondary.

OUTLOOK
I'm not buying the hype on this Yellow Jackets team. Sure, Georgia Tech will be fun to watch, as there's a lot of talent at some important positions on offense. But the shaky offensive line scares me, and the defensive changes aren't all that comforting either. The Yellow Jackets also have a tougher schedule than you'd think for a team with a higher win total. MIddle-of-the-pack ACC teams will like their chances against them in home games.

prediction

UNDER 7.5 WINS

LOUISVILLE
CARDINALS

Head Coach: Jeff Brohm (3rd)
2024 Record: 9-4 SU & 7-6 ATS, 9-4 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

15 OFFENSE: 7
DEFENSE: 8

SOS
44.27
(#52 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3.3/-0.3
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+850

MAKE PLAYOFF
+300

CFP CHAMPION
100-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	34.3	14	26.1	64
YARDS PER POINT	12.8	25	15	52
PLAYS PER GAME	66.7	86		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:45	76		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	40.0%	64	36.4%	37
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	439.8	16	390.6	74
YARDS PER PLAY	6.6	6	5.5	64
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.8	102		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	176.8	39	140.8	45
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.4	13	3.9	43
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.8	45		
COMPLETION %	62.1%	57	62.6%	85
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	262.9	29	249.8	106
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8	31	7.5	78
TURNOVERS	0.9	20	1.3	80

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

54.0 CONFERENCE: #4 of 17
NATIONAL: #25 of 136

Jeff Brohm led the Cardinals to 10 wins in his first year on the sidelines for his alma mater, then he followed that up with a 9-4 season in 2024. This year, a spot in the ACC Championship Game is the goal.

Brohm has done great work with transfer quarterbacks throughout his career, so Miller Moss was eager to play for Louisville after an up-and-down career with USC. The Cardinals will be pretty loaded around Moss, so he's in a good position to succeed.

Louisville also has eight players with starting experience returning on defense, and they were 40th in the nation in YPP allowed (5.37) last year.

OFFENSE
Two years ago, Moss threw for 372 yards with six touchdowns as USC beat Louisville in the Holiday Bowl. Perhaps that was the moment Brohm fell in love with the signal caller. Moss isn't the most mobile quarterback, which is why he was an odd fit in Lincoln Riley's offense. However, he's very effective when he has time to set his feet and throw. He should have that with the Cardinals having filled some needs along the O-Line with players that started in previous stops. Brohm likes his unit up front.

Running Isaac Brown should be in for another big year running behind that line. He ran for 1,173 yards and 11 scores last year, and he also averaged 7.1 yards per carry. He's a threat to make something big happen every time he gets a touch, and his presence should help Moss a ton.

Louisville might also have the best receiving core in the conference. Wideouts Caullin Lacy and Chris Bell are ballers.

DEFENSE
Louisville's linebackers are sure to be a strength, as TJ Quinn and Stanquan Clark are excellent. The team also added a player at defensive end in Clev Lubin, who had 9.5 sacks for Coastal Carolina last year. He's going to work on the outside alongside a strong defensive front.

I also have some more faith in this secondary than most. Jojo Evans was a first-team Conference USA performer at Marshall, and he'll lead a group of transfers that produced at previous stops.

OUTLOOK
This team looks loaded to me on the offensive side of the ball, and the defense will be strong as long as some of the transfers in the secondary do alright with the jump in competition. With that in mind, it wouldn't surprise me if the Cardinals are one of the best teams in the conference. The issue is Louisville's schedule is a nightmare. Road games at Miami, Virginia Tech and SMU, plus home games against Clemson and Kentucky, could be challenging.

prediction

UNDER 8.5 WINS

MIAMI
HURRICANES
Head Coach: Mario Cristobal (4th)
2024 Record: 10-3 SU & 6-7 ATS, 10-3 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS
14 OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 8

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
60.0 CONFERENCE: #2 of 17
NATIONAL: #11 of 136

Miami was 9-0 to start the 2024 season, Cam Ward looked like the Heisman Trophy frontrunner and Mario Cristobal seemed like he was on the verge of leading the Hurricanes to the College Football Playoff. From there, Miami, which always has a massive NIL budget and sky-high expectations, fell apart.

The Hurricanes lost two of their final three games, and they gave up at least 30 points in five of their final eight games. They also gave up 42 in a loss to Iowa State in the Pop-Tarts Bowl.

Defensive coordinator Lance Guidry ended up being the fall guy, as he was replaced in the offseason. Cristobal then went out and re-tooled the roster with his unlimited funding. The splashiest acquisition was Georgia quarterback Carson Beck, but there were several others.

Once again, it's National Championship or bust for the Hurricanes, but it's been all bust since 2001.

OFFENSE
Beck threw for 3,485 yards with 28 touchdowns and 12 picks last year, and he got a big deal to take his talents to South Beach. Beck is definitely capable of making some big time throws, but he's also a mistake-prone player. Will that change now that he's no longer facing SEC defenses consistently?

The Hurricanes will have an elite offensive line, so that helps Beck and running back Mark Fletcher a ton. It's also hard not to like Miami's wide receivers, even with a lot of talent from last year out the door.

Realistically, there are some moving pieces here, but talent isn't an issue and Shannon Dawson always has good offenses.

DEFENSE
Minnesota was 13th in YPP allowed (5.05) and 19th in EPA per play allowed (-0.10) in 2024, so new defensive coordinator Corey Hetherman, who led that Golden Gophers defense, looks like a strong hire. He'll have plenty of talent to work with, too.

Rueben Bain Jr. and Akheem Mesidor could be one of the nation's top pass-rushing duos, David Blay is a monster in the middle of the line and the Hurricanes used the transfer portal to add some absolute dogs in the secondary.

As long as the team can stomach the loss of Francisco Mauigoa, this should be a very strong defense.

OUTLOOK
Miami's defense should be much better than it was a year ago, when the team ranked 56th in the nation in YPP allowed (5.64). There's also plenty of potential on offense. The Hurricanes do have a brutal schedule though. They face Notre Dame to start the year, they host Florida and Louisville and they go on the road to take on Florida State, SMU and Virginia Tech. Do you feel great about Miami winning any of those games?

schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/31	NOTRE DAME	+4.3	65.5
9/6	BETHUNE-COOKMAN	-64.5	-2.5
9/13	SOUTH FLORIDA	-21.2	41
9/20	FLORIDA	-3	59.5
10/4	at Florida St	-8	50
10/17	LOUISVILLE	-8.3	54
10/25	STANFORD	-24.3	38
11/1	at SMU	-1.5	55.5
11/8	SYRACUSE	-15.7	46.5
11/15	NC STATE	-15.2	47
11/22	at Virginia Tech	-8.7	49
11/29	at Pittsburgh	-10.1	47.5

SOS
45.32
(#40 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2/0.3
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+380

MAKE PLAYOFF
+170

CFP CHAMPION
40-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	42.9	1	26.7	70
YARDS PER POINT	12.5	16	12.7	111
PLAYS PER GAME	72.7	21		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:33	14		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	55.4%	1	37.8%	49
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	536.2	1	338.6	29
YARDS PER PLAY	7.4	1	5.2	44
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.9	100		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	185.9	27	117.8	22
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.6	5	3.9	36
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38	15		
COMPLETION %	66.2%	21	58.0%	29
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	350.3	2	220.8	62
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	9.2	6	6.8	40
TURNOVERS	1.3	50	1.3	80

prediction
UNDER 9.5 WINS

NORTH CAROLINA STATE
WOLFPACK
Head Coach: Dave Doeren (13th)
2024 Record: 6-7 SU & 4-9 ATS, 8-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS
15
OFFENSE: 8 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 7

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	EAST CAROLINA	-12.9	37
9/6	VIRGINIA	-6.8	43
9/11	at Wake Forest	-6.5	38
9/20	at Duke	+4.1	48
9/27	VIRGINIA TECH	-1	49
10/4	CAMPBELL	-39	11
10/11	at Notre Dame	+21.8	65.5
10/25	at Pittsburgh	+3.4	47.5
11/1	GEORGIA TECH	+2.5	52
11/15	at Miami Fl	+15.2	60
11/21	FLORIDA ST	+0.2	50
11/29	NORTH CAROLINA	-3.5	46.5

SOS
45.13
(#45 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.9/-0.2
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
45-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
16-1

CFP CHAMPION
400-1

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	27.8	56	30.9	98
YARDS PER POINT	13.2	39	12.8	110
PLAYS PER GAME	63.7	118		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:25	29		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	35.9%	99	37.7%	48
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	366	83	394.3	82
YARDS PER PLAY	5.7	50	5.9	85
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.3	105		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	140.5	81	161	80
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.3	66	4.8	97
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	29.3	77		
COMPLETION %	65.2%	26	61.4%	71
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	225.5	61	233.3	82
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.7	40	7.3	62
TURNOVERS	1.8	116	1.6	41

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
47.0 CONFERENCE: #10 of 17
NATIONAL: #50 of 136

Dave Doeren is 87-65 since taking the NC State job, and last year's 6-7 record marked the first time since 2019 in which the Wolfpack didn't win at least eight games. Doeren has done great with this program, and he should be given some time to figure things out even if this ends up being a down year.

Doeren did well to keep quarterback CJ Bailey from transferring, as he certainly didn't have a shortage of suitors. But the rest of the roster isn't all that inspiring — especially in the trenches.

Doeren has exceeded expectations before, and he can certainly do it again. But he can use a little momentum. Most of the noise is coming from down the road at UNC — or Will Wade and the basketball program.

OFFENSE
For a while it looked like Bailey was going to transfer, but he's sticking around for his sophomore season. Bailey possesses some real arm talent, and he knows how to use his legs. Last year, he had a game in which he ran for 83 yards and three touchdowns against Georgia Tech. If he can continue to make strides as a passer, the sky's the limit.

Unfortunately for Bailey, he's working behind an offensive line that is a little hard to trust. That's also bad news for talented running back Hollywood Smothers, who can make plays in a variety of different ways.

If the line doesn't do a good job this year, it won't matter that the Wolfpack have talented pass catchers in tight end Justin Joly and wide receiver Noah Rogers.

DEFENSE
Losing Tony Gibson hurts. He consistently fielded good defenses in Raleigh. D.J. Eliot, who has been around the block and even served as linebackers coach for the Philadelphia Eagles two years ago, should be up for the task of calling the shots.

This defense is just a little hard to pin down right now. The Wolfpack will need Temple transfer Tra Thomas to help Isaiah Shirley and Travali Price in making up a strong pass rushing group. That's a big part of what Eliot wants to do.

I have some real concerns about a secondary that lost four starters. NC State will be relying a little too much on young talent.

OUTLOOK
Doeren is definitely a bet-on coach. In his 12 seasons with NC State, the team has had a winning record in nine of them. The Wolfpack also won nine games just two years ago. Still, this team is working in two new coordinators, and the depth chart doesn't look as good as it has in recent seasons. So, even with Bailey under center, I'd be looking Under here. We'll probably see NC State earn a big upset at some point, but that's about all I'm expecting.

prediction
UNDER 6.5 WINS

NORTH CAROLINA
TAR HEELS

Head Coach: Bill Belichick (1st)
2024 Record: 6-7 SU & 2-10-1 ATS, 5-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

11 OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 5

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
9/1	TCU	+3	52
9/6	at Charlotte	-19.4	25.5
9/13	RICHMOND	-24.5	24
9/20	at UCF	+0.9	44.5
10/4	CLEMSON	+14.6	63.5
10/17	at California	-1.9	42
10/25	VIRGINIA	-5.7	43
10/31	at Syracuse	+2.7	46.5
11/8	STANFORD	-11.1	38
11/15	at Wake Forest	-6.1	38
11/22	DUKE	-1	48
11/29	at Nc State	+3.5	47

SOS
42.75
(#62 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.3/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
40-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
13-1

CFP CHAMPION
300-1

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	29.8	45	29.6	89
YARDS PER POINT	13.4	46	13.3	95
PLAYS PER GAME	70.9	41		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:55	70		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	36.6%	92	36.0%	36
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	397.8	51	393.2	81
YARDS PER PLAY	5.6	62	5.6	72
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.9	41		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	170	48	155.5	69
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.5	56	4.1	54
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.3	67		
COMPLETION %	59.0%	92	58.9%	38
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	227.8	60	237.7	90
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.5	51	8.1	102
TURNOVERS	1.4	63	1.1	105

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

46.5 CONFERENCE: #11 of 17
NATIONAL: #51 of 136

The drama surrounding North Carolina was out of control this offseason, but we're looking forward to seeing what the 73-year-old can do in Chapel Hill. Our old pal Michael Lombardi is along for the ride, as he's the GM for North Carolina, and we know that this duo is capable of doing special things together.

Belichick is a six-time Super Bowl champion, so this will be a well-coached team as long as his heart is really in this. The question is, do they have the talent they need right now?

Most of the talent from last year's offense is gone, including star running back Omarion Hampton, and the defense is inexperienced. So, it'll take every ounce of "Chapel Bill" to drag this team Over a win total of 7.5.

OFFENSE
Belichick and Lombardi prioritized the offensive line in the portal. UNC added a couple of experienced starters, and the team also brought back starters Aidan Banfield, Austin Blaske and Trevyon Green. The running game might not be as explosive as it was with Hampton, but Davion Gause, and whoever gets carries behind him, should run well behind this front.

At quarterback, the Tar Heels are hoping that South Alabama transfer Gio Lopez, a talented dual-threat option, can succeed in the ACC. He does have some good weapons to work with, including Kobe Paysour, who was a big play threat last year.

However, the talent here isn't quite as good as some of the other top teams in the ACC, and retaining offensive coordinator Freddie Kitchens wasn't the most inspiring move.

DEFENSE
North Carolina was outside the top 75 in YPP allowed (5.96) last year, and that'll surely change in 2025. Even with only five players with starting experience back, the safest bet — and one you can't actually make — for the Tar Heels is that Belichick, and his son, will put out a better product on this side of the ball.

Landing UConn transfer Pryce Yates, who has 12.5 sacks in his career, was a good start, and there are some other big bodies up front.

I'm just not high on the linebackers or defensive backs, but Belichick should be able to make sure this defense bends and doesn't break.

OUTLOOK
I was pretty bullish on how this would go when Belichick was first hired, but there are big question marks on both sides of the ball. Perhaps they'll get it figured out with some improved recruiting, but expecting eight wins doesn't seem fair with this schedule. There's always a shot Belichick will work miracles with his roster, but the Under is juiced for a reason. This thing will heat up once prized recruit Bryce Baker gets to run the show at quarterback.

prediction

UNDER 7.5 WINS

PITTSBURGH
PANTHERS

Head Coach: Pat Narduzzi (11th)
2024 Record: 7-6 SU & 7-6 ATS, 6-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

16   OFFENSE: 8 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	DUQUESNE	-35	15
9/6	C MICHIGAN	-22.6	28
9/13	at West Virginia	-2	43
9/27	LOUISVILLE	+3.5	54
10/4	BOSTON COLLEGE	-3.9	46.5
10/11	at Florida St	+4.7	50
10/18	at Syracuse	+1.5	46.5
10/25	NC STATE	-3.4	47
11/1	at Stanford	-7.9	38
11/15	NOTRE DAME	+16.1	65.5
11/22	at Georgia Tech	+6.4	52
11/29	MIAMI FL	+10.1	60

SOS
44.79
(#49 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
45-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
17-1

CFP CHAMPION
500-1

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	29.6	46	29.3	86
YARDS PER POINT	13.1	34	13	103
PLAYS PER GAME	75.1	6		
TIME OF POSSESSION	26:44	128		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	37.1%	89	33.5%	17
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	388	57	382.7	69
YARDS PER PLAY	5.2	94	5	25
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.9	100		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	128.2	93	116.3	20
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.9	85	3.2	10
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38.7	11		
COMPLETION %	59.7%	81	58.8%	36
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	259.8	33	266.4	119
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.7	99	7.2	57
TURNOVERS	1.7	99	1.3	80

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

47.5   CONFERENCE: #9 of 17
NATIONAL: #48 of 136

Pittsburgh lost 48-46 against Toledo in the GameAbove Sports Bowl last year, but Pat Narduzzi still guided the Panthers to their fifth winning season in the last six years. All in all, he's 72-56 since coming over from Michigan State, and you generally know what you're getting from his teams every year. The Panthers will be fundamentally sound and win the games they're supposed to win. However, breaking through and doing more than that has been a challenge.

Narduzzi did win 11 games in 2021. Pitt also followed that up with a nine-win campaign in 2022. But since then, things have been a little uglier. Will that change in 2025?

The Panthers do have some big time talent in quarterback Eli Holstein and running Desmond Reid, and they also have a lot of dudes returning on defense. So, if things break right, this could be another strong season in Pennsylvania.

OFFENSE
If Holstein is healthy after offseason ankle surgery, he should be one of the better quarterbacks in the ACC. This offense sputtered down the stretch last year, but Holstein threw for 2,225 yards with 17 touchdowns and added another 328 yards and three scores with his legs. He's a serious playmaker at the quarterback spot, and Reid is one of the best backs in the ACC.

Pitt also has some speed at wide receiver, plus some solid tight end options. But does this team have a trustworthy offensive line? The blocking hasn't been there for the Panthers in recent years, with injuries to blame for some of that. If the line isn't better, it doesn't matter how good Holstein and Reid are.

DEFENSE
Pitt was 39th in the nation in EPA per play allowed (5.40) last year. The Panthers now return eight players with starting experience, so a leap into the top 25 should be expected.

Kyle Louis, who had 7.0 sacks and four interceptions last year, is the leader of one of the best linebacking corps in college football. This group, which also includes Rasheem Biles and Braylan Lovelace, is disruptive against the run, can get after the QB and stays solid in coverage.

The Panthers just need to hope that some transfers can make up for talent lost in the defensive line and the secondary. But Narduzzi and his staff do a good job of identifying defensive pieces, so this team should be very good on this side of the ball.

OUTLOOK
The offensive line is a question mark, but Pitt has some transfers that should be able to do a decent enough job to help the team win seven games. The Panthers have a home schedule that should be navigable, and road games at Syracuse, Stanford and Georgia Tech are winnable. This team just needs a little luck in the health department.

prediction

OVER 6.5 WINS

SMU
MUSTANGS

Head Coach: Rhett Lashlee (4th)
2024 Record: 11-3 SU & 8-6 ATS, 8-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

12   OFFENSE: 7 INCLUDING QB
         DEFENSE: 5

SOS
43.33
(#58 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3.3/-0.2
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+850

MAKE PLAYOFF
+370

CFP CHAMPION
110-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	34.8	13	23.2	37
YARDS PER POINT	12	6	14.6	68
PLAYS PER GAME	70.7	46		
TIME OF POSSESSION	27:57	116		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	42.9%	35	33.7%	20
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	416.8	34	339	30
YARDS PER PLAY	5.9	43	4.6	8
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.5	46		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	152.2	72	105.3	9
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.1	81	3	4
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	31.8	54		
COMPLETION %	63.4%	40	57.2%	16
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	264.6	24	233.7	83
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.3	19	6.5	29
TURNOVERS	1.8	112	1.5	52

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

55.5   CONFERENCE: #3 of 17
           NATIONAL: #21 of 136

SMU didn't need much time to get acclimated in the ACC. The Mustangs went undefeated in conference play in the regular season last year, and they might have won the ACC Championship Game if not for a miserable first half. Rhett Lashlee has a good thing going in Dallas, where his program has impressive facilities and legitimate NIL buy-in from the right people. With that in mind, there's staying power for the Mustangs near the top of the college football world.

This year, another trip to the College Football Playoff is the goal, but the higher-ups will be hoping for a little more than just that. If things break right, Jennings has a shot at winning the Heisman. The team also addressed a need for some size along the defensive line. So, there isn't much preventing SMU from building on last year.

OFFENSE

SMU was 29th in the nation in adjusted EPA per play (0.06) last year, and the team probably would have been a little higher if not for some early-season struggles. It took a few weeks for Lashlee to really give the keys to Jennings, who took Preston Stone's job and ran with it. That was when the Mustangs offense became a nightmare for opposing defenses, as Jennings can make every throw and is a dynamic runner.

This season, Jennings appears ready to take the leap and the offensive line is experienced and filled with future pros. Also, while the running back and wide receiver rooms are unproven, there's talent scattered throughout and Lashlee is going to have no problems making everybody comfortable.

There's a real path towards this being the best offense in the ACC, and top 10 in YPP and EPA per play is on the table.

DEFENSE

SMU's defense was pretty strong last year. The Mustangs were near the top of the leaderboard in several key metrics, but a lack of size was exposed against Clemson and Penn State.

SMU responded by adding a lot of bodies up front, including one that's 6-foot-6 and 302 pounds in Purdue transfer Jeffrey M'Ba. The Mustangs should look more like a CFP team in the front seven, and that could make a big difference when thinking about the ceiling of this team.

This team also has a good group of defensive backs, and Lashlee added some impact transfers at linebacker.

OUTLOOK

SMU's going to be very good on both sides of the ball this year. Another undefeated season likely isn't happening, as the Mustangs have a tough schedule. But I do feel better about SMU winning nine or 10 games than seven or eight. Some of the rougher matchups — like Miami and Louisville — will be played at Gerald J. Ford Stadium, making it hard to worry too much about the wheels falling off.

prediction

OVER 8.5 WINS

STANFORD
CARDINAL

Head Coach: Frank Reich (1st)
2024 Record: 3-9 SU & 4-7-1 ATS, 5-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

14 OFFENSE: 6
        DEFENSE: 8

SOS
48.64
(#17 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
1.7/-0.3
HOME/ROAD

ODDS

CONFERENCE
500-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
200-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

2024 STATS

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	21.2	109	36.1	122
YARDS PER POINT	14.8	82	11.9	125
PLAYS PER GAME	71.2	37		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:26	28		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	34.2%	116	47.1%	119
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	313.6	120	430.3	112
YARDS PER PLAY	4.4	128	6.3	109
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.8	59		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	133.9	88	142.7	49
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.6	106	4.4	71
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.9	63		
COMPLETION %	58.2%	98	65.9%	110
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	179.7	111	287.5	129
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	5.8	126	8.6	121
TURNOVERS	1.9	119	1.5	54

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

38.0 CONFERENCE: #16 of 17
          NATIONAL: #80 of 136

Stanford dealt with some real turmoil earlier in the year. Back in March, Andrew Luck, the GM of the Cardinal, made the decision to fire Troy Taylor, who had been investigated for mistreatment of female staffers. It also didn't help that he underperformed as the leader of the team, going 3-9 in each of his two seasons in Palo Alto.

Luck decided to name Frank Reich, who coached him in the NFL, the team's interim coach. Reich is a sharp offensive mind that won a Super Bowl as the offensive coordinator with the Philadelphia Eagles, and he was an NFL head coach from 2018 to 2023. So, from an X's and O's standpoint, the Cardinal will be in good shape. However, the talent on this roster isn't all that inspiring.

Realistically, this should be a competitive team in 2025, but it won't be a good one. And it'll be interesting to see who Luck hires after the year

OFFENSE
There's a pretty open quarterback competition between Ben Gulbranson, Dylan Rizk and Elijah Brown, but it feels like it's going to be the redshirt freshman that gets the job. Regardless, whoever does end up running this show should be in decent shape. Reich is a proven quarterback coach, the offensive line is expected to improve and they're not devoid of talent at wide receiver or running back. Tight end Sam Roush is an interesting player to keep an eye on. This coaching staff should respect his skill set, which might be NFL worthy.

If the offensive line does its job, there's a good chance this offense will be significantly better than it was a year ago. That's a pretty low bar to clear too. Stanford was just 126th in the nation in YPP (5.02) last season.

DEFENSE
Stanford was also outside the top 100 in YPP allowed (6.64) last season, so this team was miserable on both sides of the ball. However, the Cardinal do have eight players with starting experience back, including shutdown corner Collin Wright.

The secondary should be the strength of this defense, and some strides with the defensive line and linebacking corps would go a long way towards Stanford becoming a top 90 defense. Expecting anything beyond that would be a little unrealistic.

OUTLOOK
While I don't think this is going to be a good football team, I do think it's going to be a well-coached one. That said, I trust Stanford to win home games against teams like San Jose State and Cal. I also think they'll play some toss-ups on the road against Hawaii and Virginia. With those four games being winnable, along with an upset somewhere along the way being a real possibility, I'm going with Stanford to win four games. The odds are certainly enticing.

prediction

OVER 3.5 WINS

SYRACUSE
ORANGE

Head Coach: Fran Brown (2nd)
2024 Record: 10-3 SU & 6-7 ATS, 7-5-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

8 OFFENSE: 2
   DEFENSE: 6

schedule

SOS
48.39
(#18 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/-0.2
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
70-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
25-1

CFP CHAMPION
500-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	33.4	20	30.4	96
YARDS PER POINT	13.8	58	12.9	108
PLAYS PER GAME	74.6	9		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:59	5		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	48.6%	7	40.0%	73
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	461.9	6	391.5	76
YARDS PER PLAY	6.2	20	6.5	122
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30	116		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	95.8	122	161.4	82
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.2	124	5.3	117
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	42.6	3		
COMPLETION %	71.0%	9	75.5%	133
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	366.2	1	230.1	74
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.6	11	8.3	109
TURNOVERS	1.1	32	1.3	80

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

46.5 CONFERENCE: #13 of 17
    NATIONAL: #54 of 136

Fran Brown arrived in Syracuse with big expectations after having coached the defensive backs at Georgia for four years, and his first season really couldn't have gone better. The Orange went 10-3, had a big ACC win over Miami and won its game against Washington State in the Holiday Bowl. Now, Brown is hoping that the team's momentum won't be stalled, but he only has eight total starters back.

Brown does have some young talent that appears ready for bigger roles, and he did well in adding players in the transfer portal. He also proved that he's a difference-making coach when it comes to preparation. So, hopes will still be high when the Orange hit the field for a meeting with Tennessee on August 30th.

OFFENSE

Kyle McCord might have been a little disappointing at Ohio State, but he was a revelation for Syracuse. Last season, McCord threw for 4,779 yards with 34 touchdowns, and the Orange were tied for 10th in the nation in EPA per dropback (0.23). Unfortunately for Syracuse, McCord is now on the Philadelphia Eagles. Two-time All-ACC running back LeQuint Allen is also gone, and Cuse only has two players with starting experience back on offense.

The offensive line is a question mark with so much turnover. They're also a little less talented when looking at the running backs and receivers, making it hard to envision the collective coming close to touching last year's 34.1 points per game.

The quarterback situation doesn't seem promising either. Rickie Collins was named the starter after spring ball, but Brown brought in Notre Dame quarterback Steve Angeli as a late-portal addition. He could factor in eventually.

DEFENSE

While Syracuse's offense was great last year, the team was outside the top 100 in EPA per play allowed (0.07). The Orange were also one of the worst teams in college football when it came to stopping the run.

Syracuse added some size along the defensive line in the portal, and the team also has some talented youngsters ready to step up and make plays.

Syracuse should be solid at linebacker, where Derek McDonald and Anwar Sparrow make up a formidable duo. The team also feels good about its group of defensive backs, with Duce Chestnut being one of the standouts in the secondary.

OUTLOOK

There might be some interesting young pieces on this team, but they saw a lot of production go out the door after a 10-win season. Brown will probably get the team back on track eventually, but it's hard to imagine this being anything more than a five-win season. The only game on the schedule that I'm certain the Orange will win is a home meeting with Colgate on September 12th, making this one of my favorite Under plays.

prediction

UNDER 5.5 WINS

VIRGINIA
CAVALIERS

Head Coach: Tony Elliott (4th)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 6-5-1 ATS, 4-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

14 OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	COASTAL CAROLINA	-11.9	33.5
9/6	at Nc State	+6.8	47
9/13	WILLIAM & MARY	-26.5	19
9/20	STANFORD	-7.4	38
9/26	FLORIDA ST	+5	50
10/4	at Louisville	+14.2	54
10/18	WASHINGTON ST	-9.7	35
10/25	at North Carolina	+5.7	46.5
11/1	at California	+1.4	42
11/8	WAKE FOREST	-7	38
11/15	at Duke	+7.8	48
11/29	VIRGINIA TECH	+3.8	49

SOS
41.52
(#67 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.1/0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
80-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
25-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	21.6	105	30.2	95
YARDS PER POINT	16.1	104	14	81
PLAYS PER GAME	74.1	14		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:54	71		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	34.5%	113	40.4%	77
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	348.5	97	422.1	104
YARDS PER PLAY	4.7	118	6	95
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.9	69		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	125.7	96	145.1	54
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.5	111	4.2	57
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.1	33		
COMPLETION %	61.1%	68	62.2%	80
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	222.8	66	277	125
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.5	111	8.2	107
TURNOVERS	1.6	88	1.3	76

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

43.0 CONFERENCE: #14 of 17
NATIONAL: #64 of 136

Tony Elliott, once the offensive coordinator at Clemson, is still waiting for his big breakthrough in Charlottesville, but last year was a step in the right direction. After back-to-back three-win seasons to start his head coaching career, Elliott led Virginia to a five-win 2024 campaign.

This season, the Cavaliers have a win total as high as 6.5 in some spots, so the oddsmakers at least think Virginia will flirt with one of the better years it has had under Elliott. It isn't hard to figure out why.

Virginia has eight starters with returning experience back on defense, and the team added a proven quarterback in Chandler Morris.

OFFENSE
Virginia made a pretty big splash in the transfer portal, adding quarterback Chandler Morris, who threw for 3,774 yards and 31 touchdowns for North Texas last year. Morris is also a decent mover, as he ran for 242 yards and four touchdowns. He was similarly mobile in his final season with TCU.

Morris is a more reliable passer than anybody Virginia has had under center in the Elliott era, but that won't matter if he doesn't have time to throw. The Cavaliers were miserable at keeping their quarterbacks upright last year, and they have been dealt some big blows heading into the season. They lost one of their potential starters, Blake Steen, as a late transfer to Mississippi State, and they lost Monroe Mills, a high-profile transfer, to a torn ACL in the spring.

Virginia will have talent at running back and wide receiver. So, if the O-Line can surprisingly take a step forward, this group has potential.

DEFENSE
Losing first-team All-ACC safety Jonas Sanker is a blow to this defense, but bringing in Louisville's Devin Neal (All-ACC second team) and pairing him with Antonio Clary should still make safety a real strength on defense.

The Cavaliers will just have to hope that some transfers can provide solid play at corner, and they did add some experienced DBs.

Virginia has a very good group of linebackers, and the defensive line should be better than it was last year. That means this defense has a shot at being pretty good in 2025.

OUTLOOK
If you want to go Over on Virginia, you can find a win total of 6 that could help you avoid some risk. However, I think a five-win season is far more likely than a seven-win season, so I'm going with the Under on 6.5 instead. The path to success for the Cavaliers is improved play up front on offense. There's now talent at QB, the skill positions are solid and the defense should be above average. But I don't trust the blocking, and it's hard to win 50-50 games if you can't protect.

prediction

UNDER 6.5 WINS

VIRGINIA TECH
HOKIES

Head Coach: Brent Pry (4th)
2024 Record: 6-7 SU & 6-7 ATS, 8-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

12
OFFENSE: 5 QB
DEFENSE: 7

SOS
44.06
(#54 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
35-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
16-1

CFP CHAMPION
300-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	28.2	52	22.8	33
YARDS PER POINT	13.1	33	15.9	22
PLAYS PER GAME	66.5	88		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:12	88		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	36.3%	95	39.2%	63
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	367.8	77	363	52
YARDS PER PLAY	5.5	69	5.1	41
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.8	42		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	178.4	34	147.1	56
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.7	39	3.9	42
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	26.1	111		
COMPLETION %	59.0%	91	54.8%	6
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	189.4	105	215.9	56
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.3	67	7	48
TURNOVERS	1.3	49	1.9	12

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

49.0 CONFERENCE: #7 of 17
NATIONAL: #43 of 136

Last year was wildly disappointing for Brent Pry and Virginia Tech. The Hokies looked like a sleeper to win the ACC, but they ended up finishing the season 6-7.

Pry responded with sweeping changes to his coaching staff, as he hired Philip Montgomery as offensive coordinator and Sam Siefkes as defensive coordinator. Virginia Tech did lose a ton of talent on both sides of the ball, so both guys will have their work cut out for them. But the hope is that much better coaching will help the Hokies overcome the departures.

OFFENSE
Montgomery has built some awesome offenses throughout his career, so there's hope he'll do the same immediately in Blacksburg. Kyron Drones' ability to make plays with his legs will help. Last year didn't go as planned for the quarterback, but he was banged up throughout the season. Now that he's healthier, his dual-threat ability should be a game changer for the Hokies.

This offensive line should be in for a big improvement, which is part of the reason I'm buying a bounceback year for Drones. Pry hired West Virginia offensive line coach Matt Moore, who did great work up front with the Mountaineers and brought over some of his players.

There's also plenty to work with when it comes to pass catchers, especially with tight end Benji Gosnell back. He's a rising star in this conference. There's also some talent in the backfield, where Terion Stewart comes over after being first-team All-MAC last season. He rushed for 898 yards and six scores for Bowling Green.

DEFENSE
The Hokies finished 55th in the nation in YPP allowed (5.62) last year, and that was unacceptable considering the experience and talent scattered throughout the unit. Pry, a defensive-minded coach himself, decided that Siefkes, known for an aggressive approach, would be the right guy to lead his defense.

Pry added a bunch of full-time starters in the transfer portal, mostly along the defensive line and in the secondary. He also has a good group of linebackers returning from last season, along with some transfers there, too.

Virginia Tech might not be a top-25 defense right away, but things should look better this year.

OUTLOOK
Virginia Tech burned me last year. I liked the Hokies to go Over their win total, and I even played some alternates. However, I don't like letting previous results sway me too much, so I'm ready to get hurt again. You can get some serious plus-money odds for Virginia Tech to win at least seven games, and I think it's a real possibility. The Hokies have a bunch of easy home games, plus some of their tougher games will be played in Blacksburg. That should help them win a big one or two and go Over the number.

prediction

OVER 6.5 WINS

WAKE FOREST
DEMON DEACONS

Head Coach: Jake Dickert (1st)
2024 Record: 4-8 SU & 3-7-2 ATS, 5-6-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

11 OFFENSE: 5
DEFENSE: 6

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/29	KENNESAW ST	-17.9	22.5
9/6	W CAROLINA	-16.2	24
9/11	NC STATE	+6.5	47
9/27	GEORGIA TECH	+12.1	52
10/4	at Virginia Tech	+13.5	49
10/11	at Oregon St	+4.9	39.5
10/25	SMU	+15	55.5
11/1	at Florida St	+14.2	50
11/8	at Virginia	+7	43
11/15	NORTH CAROLINA	+6.1	46.5
11/22	DELAWARE	-15	25.5
11/29	at Duke	+12.8	48

SOS
41.58
(#65 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.3/0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
500-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
150-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	23.9	89	34.3	115
YARDS PER POINT	15	84	13	106
PLAYS PER GAME	74.4	12		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:19	85		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	37.5%	86	44.4%	103
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	358.3	86	444.5	119
YARDS PER PLAY	4.8	112	6	96
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.2	51		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	125.5	98	155.2	67
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.4	117	4.6	85
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	33.5	37		
COMPLETION %	61.1%	67	71.1%	131
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	232.8	55	289.3	131
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7	83	7.4	72
TURNOVERS	1.9	119	1.5	43

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

38.0 CONFERENCE: #17 of 17
NATIONAL: #83 of 136

Dave Clawson's final two years with Wake Forest were rough, as the Demon Deacons went 8-16 in 2023 and 2024. However, Clawson had a winning record in six of his previous seven seasons with the program, and Wake Forest was 11-3 with a win in the Gator Bowl in 2021. Clawson very much helped this team find a spot on the island of relevancy, and Jake Dickert has some big shoes to fill.

Dickert is coming off a solid run at Washington State, where he went 23-20 over parts of four years and dealt with massive changes to the Pac-12 really well.

Dickert is ready for life in this conference, and his defensive mindset could be a nice change of pace in Winston-Salem. But he does need time.

OFFENSE
While this is likely to be a rough season for Wake Forest, the team should have a great offensive line. That's good news for running back Demond Claiborne, who rushed for 1,049 yards and 11 touchdowns last year. In Claiborne and dual-threat quarterback Robby Ashford, who transferred in after stints with Auburn and South Carolina, the Demon Deacons have two great runners.

The question with Wake Forest is, will there be any passing game whatsoever? Ashford hasn't been accurate throughout his career, which is why he hasn't taken the leap despite having real speed and a big body. Perhaps he can do that this year, but I have my doubts. I'm also not sure the team has the pass catching weapons it'll need to scare opposing defenses.

DEFENSE
Wake Forest was 103rd in the nation in YPP allowed (6.29) last season. Fixing this side of the ball will be Dickert's toughest job.

The Demon Deacons do have some of their best players from last year back, as Nick Andersen, Davaughn Patterson and Dylan Hazen were productive starters a year ago. Dickert also added a lot in the transfer portal, though the guys he brought over from Washington State are all on the offensive side of the ball.

Maybe this team will be a little better than it was a year ago, but it's still going to be one of the weaker groups in the ACC.

OUTLOOK
Wake Forest should start 2-0 with meetings with Kennesaw State and Western Carolina to open the season, but things should go downhill from there. The Demon Deacons have the potential to be a good against-the-spread team, as they have a good O-Line, some good runners and a better-coached defense. But it's hard to imagine them consistently winning games in what looks like an improved ACC.

prediction

UNDER 4.5 WINS

BIG 12
preview

**Coverage by
Zach Cohen**

Last season, Arizona State was picked to finish last in the Big 12, but Kenny Dillingham led the Sun Devils to a conference title. They beat Iowa State 45-19 in the Big 12 Championship Game, giving hope to teams like Arizona, West Virginia, UCF and Oklahoma State—programs being given little chance to win the league in 2025.

Still, it's likely one of the favorites will come out on top this season. The question is: which one? At DraftKings Sportsbook, Kansas State and Arizona State are both listed at +550 to win it all. The Wildcats have been excellent under Chris Klieman and return dynamic dual-threat quarterback Avery Johnson, who's capable of taking them to another level. Meanwhile, the Sun Devils may have lost Cam Skattebo, but star quarterback Sam Leavitt is back — one of 17 returning players with starting experience for Dillingham. Expect more high-level football in Tempe.

What's wild is how crowded the top of the oddsboard is. Utah, Texas Tech, Baylor and TCU are all priced at 10-1 or shorter at DK, and Iowa State isn't far behind at 12-1. All of those teams have the coaching and talent to put together a championship season.

It also wouldn't be surprising to see Kansas, BYU, Colorado, Cincinnati or Houston exceed expectations. Colorado is especially intriguing. Coach Prime no longer has Shedeur Sanders or Travis Hunter, but his teams will never be short on talent.

The biggest difference with the Big 12 this year? The champion isn't just hoping to steal a game in the College Football Playoff. The teams expected to contend in this league have legitimate national title aspirations. There's no shortage of high-end talent — whether it comes from experienced rosters or deep NIL pockets. (We're looking at you, Texas Tech.)

2025 projected standings

TEAM	2024 SM PR	HOME FA	ROAD FA	SS (RANK)	ALL PRJW'S	ALL PRJL'S	CONF PRJW'S	CONF PRJL'S	DRAFTKINGS O/U
ARIZONA ST	56	2.3	0.1	45.41 (39)	8.9	3.1	6.2	2.8	8.5
KANSAS ST	55	3.2	0	45.23 (42)	8.7	3.3	6.0	3.0	8.5
BAYLOR	53	2.6	0.1	46.55 (33)	7.5	4.5	5.7	3.3	7.5
TEXAS TECH	53.5	2.5	-0.3	39.68 (69)	8.5	3.5	5.6	3.4	8.5
UTAH	53	3.1	-0.4	45.07 (46)	7.8	4.2	5.3	3.7	7.5
IOWA ST	51.5	2.6	0.1	46.72 (31)	7.5	4.5	5.3	3.7	7.5
KANSAS	49.5	2.7	0	42.88 (60)	7.1	4.9	5.0	4.0	6.5
TCU	52	2.6	-0.2	47.84 (21)	7.1	4.9	5.0	4.0	6.5
BYU	49	2.7	0.1	43.68 (56)	7.3	4.7	4.7	4.3	6.5
CINCINNATI	46	2.5	0.1	41.58 (66)	6.2	5.8	3.9	5.1	6.5
HOUSTON	44.5	2.3	0.1	43.96 (55)	6.0	6.0	3.7	5.3	6.5
COLORADO	47	2.6	-0.3	46.28 (34)	6.0	6.0	3.7	5.3	6.5
UCF	44.5	2.8	-0.5	42.43 (63)	5.9	6.1	3.5	5.5	5.5
ARIZONA	42.5	2.4	0.1	45.16 (44)	5.0	7.0	3.0	6.0	4.5
WEST VIRGINIA	43	2.6	0	45.18 (43)	4.8	7.2	2.8	6.2	5.5
OKLAHOMA ST	41.5	2.7	0.2	45.65 (36)	4.7	7.3	2.8	6.2	4.5

ARIZONA
WILDCATS

Head Coach: Brent Brennan (2nd)
2024 Record: 4-8 SU & 2-10 ATS, 6-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

16
OFFENSE: 7 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 9

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	HAWAII	-12.5	33
9/6	WEBER ST	-23.8	20.5
9/12	KANSAS ST	+10.1	55
9/27	at Iowa St	+11.5	51.5
10/4	OKLAHOMA ST	-3.2	41.5
10/11	BYU	+4.2	49
10/18	at Houston	+4.2	44.5
11/1	at Colorado	+7	47
11/8	KANSAS	+4.6	49.5
11/15	at Cincinnati	+5.9	46
11/22	BAYLOR	+8.2	53
11/28	at Arizona St	+15.7	56

SOS
45.16
(#44 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.4/0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
45-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
25-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	21.7	104	33.7	114
YARDS PER POINT	16.3	106	12.9	109
PLAYS PER GAME	67.5	78		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:29	81		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	45.6%	17	42.1%	87
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	353.1	92	434.1	113
YARDS PER PLAY	5.2	90	6.4	114
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	27.8	130		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	98.4	120	183.3	101
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.5	110	5.1	107
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.4	19		
COMPLETION %	59.4%	86	63.9%	101
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	254.7	38	250.8	110
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.8	94	8.4	111
TURNOVERS	1.7	104	1.4	66

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

42.5 CONFERENCE: #15 of 16
NATIONAL: #66 of 136

Jedd Fisch built something real in Tucson. After going 1-11 in his first season, he went 10-3 and the Wildcats won the Alamo Bowl in 2023. That was just his third year in the desert. Unfortunately, when Washington came calling with big money, Arizona wasn't able to match.

Arizona turned to Brent Brennan as Fisch's replacement. Brennan, once a grad assistant with the Wildcats, was the Mountain West Coach of the Year in 2020. He was great at San Jose State, but things got off to an ugly start in his jump to the big leagues.

Arizona went 4-8 in Brennan's first season, and the team was 2-7 in conference play. Many were calling for him to be fired, but Brennan got another year. He completely overhauled his coaching staff and made sweeping roster changes. So, we should see signs of life.

OFFENSE
Brennan hired Seth Doege to run the offense. Doege has an Air Raid background, but he values the running game. Doege was Marshall's offensive coordinator last year, and the Thundering Herd were 24th in the nation in yards per rush attempt (5.0).

If Arizona's offensive line can protect, this offense has potential. And there are reasons to believe the line will be solid, as the staff added four full-time starters in the portal.

Doege should get this rushing offense back into the top 100 — I'm high on first-team Sun Belt running back Ismail Mahdi. Also, Noah Fifita has all the talent in the world at quarterback and the Wildcats brought in some burners at wide receiver. There's hope here.

DEFENSE
Defensive end Tre Smith is back after a good season, and Arizona added some huge bodies to play alongside him on the defensive line. This team also brought back safety Dalton Johnson, who led the Wildcats in tackles. They should also be a little better at corner, where Jay'Vion Cole, who played for Texas in 2024, could make an instant impact.

Arizona's 6.4 YPP allowed last year was unacceptable, and only 20 teams in the country were worse. But the Wildcats will start nine players that started games last year, and some of the transfers they brought in were stars in lesser conferences.

OUTLOOK
I don't feel strongly about Arizona's win total, but I'd take a juiced Over on 4.5 before going Under 5.5. This is a much better team than it was a year ago, and the new coaches should do a better job with the personnel. Arizona also has home games against Hawaii, Weber State, Oklahoma State, BYU and Kansas. There might be four or five wins there alone. If the Wildcats can steal one road win, they'll be golden.

prediction
OVER 4.5 WINS

ARIZONA STATE
SUN DEVILS

Head Coach: Kenny Dillingham (3rd)
2024 Record: 11-3 SU & 12-2 ATS, 9-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

17 OFFENSE: 8 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 9

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	N ARIZONA	-31.4	26.5
9/6	at Mississippi St	-9.8	44
9/13	TEXAS ST UNIV	-20.6	38
9/20	at Baylor	-0.5	53
9/26	TCU	-6.5	52
10/11	at Utah	+0	53
10/18	TEXAS TECH	-5.1	53.5
10/25	HOUSTON	-13.7	44.5
11/1	at Iowa St	-2	51.5
11/15	WEST VIRGINIA	-15.3	43
11/22	at Colorado	-6.5	47
11/28	ARIZONA	-15.7	42.5

SOS
45.41
(#39 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.3/0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+550

MAKE PLAYOFF
+380

CFP CHAMPION
100-1

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	32.9	25	22.6	31
YARDS PER POINT	13	32	15.1	40
PLAYS PER GAME	70.9	40		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:37	12		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	45.9%	15	42.3%	88
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	429.4	25	340	32
YARDS PER PLAY	6.1	33	5.1	42
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	42.2	10		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	199.9	18	113.3	14
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.7	37	3.7	24
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	27.3	102		
COMPLETION %	61.3%	66	59.3%	42
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	229.5	57	226.7	70
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.4	14	6.7	32
TURNOVERS	0.6	3	1.6	36

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

56.0 CONFERENCE: #1 of 16
NATIONAL: #19 of 136

In Diggstown, a very underrated boxing movie, Gabriel Caine tells "Honey" Roy Palmer: "What you did tonight… couldn't be done." Well, what Kenny Dillingham did in Tempe in 2024 was similarly improbable.

The Sun Devils were picked to finish last in the Big 12 last year, and they entered the season with a win total of 4.5. Arizona State would go on to win the Big 12, routing a good Iowa State team in a 45-19 victory in the championship. The team also went to the College Football Playoff, where it fell 39-31 in an instant classic against Texas in the quarterfinals.

Expectations are now high after an 11-win season, but Dillingham has 17 players with starting experience back — including star quarterback Sam Leavitt. There's no reason the Sun Devils can't build on last year.

OFFENSE

Arizona State averaged 32.9 points per game and finished 13th in the nation in EPA per play (0.16) in 2024. Losing Cam Skattebo, who rushed for 1,711 yards and 21 touchdowns and was impossible to bring down in short-yardage situations, is going to hurt. But Kanye Udoh rushed for 1,117 yards and 10 touchdowns for Army last season, and he seems like he's up for the challenge of leading this backfield.

Realistically, the dropoff from Skattebo to Udoh might be big, but the offensive line is going to be much better than it was a year ago. Also, the passing game could take off in a big way. Leavitt is only going to be better with the experience he picked up last year, and Jordyn Tyson should be one of the best wide receivers in the nation.

Not only will this be one of the best offenses in the Big 12, but it could be one of the most potent ones in the country.

DEFENSE

While Dillingham is an offensive coach, defensive coordinator Brian Ward has made this program tough defensively. The Sun Devils were 37th in the nation in scoring defense (22.6 PPG) last year, and they could be in for some improvements this year.

Arizona State beefed up the defensive line, has a great group of linebackers — led by Keyshaun Elliot — and might have the best secondary in the conference.

OUTLOOK

The on-field product for Arizona State could be better than it was last year. The only question is, can the Sun Devils overcome a tough schedule? They'll play road games against Mississippi State, Baylor, Utah, Iowa State and Colorado. That's brutal. They'll also host a very good Texas Tech team. But I believe this team is more talented than anybody in the Big 12, and we know Dillingham and his staff can coach — and motivate. So, I'd lean Over here.

OVER 8.5 WINS

BAYLOR
BEARS

Head Coach: Dave Aranda (6th)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 9-4 ATS, 8-4-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

18 OFFENSE: 10 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/29	AUBURN	+1.3	57
9/6	at SMU	+5.7	55.5
9/13	SAMFORD	-38.5	17
9/20	ARIZONA ST	+0.5	56
9/27	at Oklahoma St	-8.9	41.5
10/4	KANSAS ST	-0.6	55
10/18	at TCU	+1.5	52
10/25	at Cincinnati	-4.6	46
11/1	UCF	-11.6	44.5
11/15	UTAH	-3	53
11/22	at Arizona	-8.2	42.5
11/29	HOUSTON	-11	44.5

SOS
46.55
(#33 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+700

MAKE PLAYOFF
+500

CFP CHAMPION
180-1

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	33.5	18	28.7	82
YARDS PER POINT	13.2	36	14.1	80
PLAYS PER GAME	70.9	41		
TIME OF POSSESSION	27:57	115		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	41.7%	49	37.6%	46
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	440.9	14	402.8	88
YARDS PER PLAY	6.2	19	5.7	79
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.3	49		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	181	32	156.6	70
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.8	32	4.2	59
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.1	51		
COMPLETION %	61.0%	69	60.9%	65
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	259.9	32	246.3	100
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.1	29	7.8	93
TURNOVERS	1.1	32	1.7	29

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

53.0 CONFERENCE: #5 of 16
NATIONAL: #30 of 136

Dave Aranda's job was in serious jeopardy after Baylor's 2-4 start to last season, but the Bears turned things around. Baylor won the final six games of the regular season, and the team could have been in the Big 12 Championship Game if not for Shedeur Sanders' Hail Mary when the teams met in Week 4. That 43-yard touchdown pass tied the game, then the Buffs went on to win in overtime.

This season, Baylor has 18 players with starting experience back. This team is loaded on both sides of the ball, and they're definitely thinking about crashing the College Football Playoff. Though, with increased expectations comes more pressure.

Aranda's 2021 season was magical, but the Bears haven't been great since. If they don't live up to the hype, he could be on the outs.

OFFENSE
Four of Baylor's five starters are back along the line. With that in mind, time won't be an issue for quarterback Sawyer Robertson, who could be in for a stellar season. Robertson threw for 3,071 yards with 28 touchdowns and only eight picks last year. He has a big arm and he's accurate down the field. He's also a good runner.

The Bears also have an electric running back combination, as Bryson Washington and Dawson Pendergrass combined to rush for 1,699 yards and 18 touchdowns last year. Baylor is also stacked when it comes to pass catchers, so there's really no weakness with this offense. And Jake Spavital is an elite play caller.

DEFENSE
Baylor gave up 26.7 points per game last year, but the team was much better down the stretch — excluding a miserable performance against LSU in the bowl game.

Linebacker Keaton Thomas, who was a first-teamer in the Big 12 last year, is the biggest name when looking at all the returners from a season ago, and the Bears are stacked in the front seven — where defensive end Jackie Marshall is another stud.

The secondary is the big question mark here. Baylor barely cracked the top 100 in EPA allowed per dropback (0.05) last year, and the team got shredded against LSU. If the passing defense isn't better this year, that'll cap the Bears upside.

OUTLOOK
Baylor's going to be a tough team to beat, and the Bears are going to look better than they did last year on both sides of the ball. The issue is they're in a deep conference, meaning a very difficult schedule. They'll play home games against Auburn, Arizona State, Kansas State and Utah, plus road games against SMU and TCU. I like this Baylor team, but it feels like there's four or five losses there. I also don't think road games against Cincinnati or Arizona will be gimmes.

prediction

UNDER 7.5 WINS

BYU
COUGARS

Head Coach: Kalani Sitake (10th)
2024 Record: 11-2 SU & 8-5 ATS, 9-4 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

8 OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 4

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	PORTLAND ST	-32.8	19
9/6	STANFORD	-14	38
9/20	at East Carolina	-9.3	37
9/27	at Colorado	+0.5	47
10/3	WEST VIRGINIA	-8.7	43
10/11	at Arizona	-4.2	42.5
10/18	UTAH	+0.9	53
10/25	at Iowa St	+5	51.5
11/8	at Texas Tech	+6.9	53.5
11/15	TCU	+0.1	52
11/22	at Cincinnati	-0.6	46
11/29	UCF	-7.7	44.5

SOS
43.68
(#56 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
20-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
10-1

CFP CHAMPION
300-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	30.3	36	20.2	18
YARDS PER POINT	12.6	19	15.6	28
PLAYS PER GAME	64.5	110		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:38	45		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	36.2%	97	42.1%	86
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	381.4	62	315.3	12
YARDS PER PLAY	5.9	42	4.8	19
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.1	92		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	159.8	66	126.6	31
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.7	40	3.8	29
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	29.1	79		
COMPLETION %	56.2%	112	55.7%	9
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	221.6	68	188.7	21
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.6	46	6.2	12
TURNOVERS	1.8	108	2.3	1

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
49.0 CONFERENCE: #9 of 16
NATIONAL: #42 of 136

BYU is coming off one of the best years in program history. The Cougars weren't expected to do much last season, but they went 11-2 and only missed out on the Big 12 Championship Game because of tiebreakers. The season also ended with a win over Colorado in the Alamo Bowl.

Kalani Sitake has proven to be one of the better leaders in the sport, as he's 72-43 since taking over his alma mater. But doing special things with this year's team would potentially be his finest work yet.

The Cougars lost a ton of talent on both sides of the ball, and some off-field stuff led to the departure of star quarterback Jake Retzlaff. There's a lot of uncertainty with this squad, but the quarterback spot was one of the only ones that was supposed to be solidified.

OFFENSE
There will be an open competition to fill Retzlaff's shoes at the quarterback position, but none of the answers will be good enough. Retzlaff threw for 2,947 yards and 20 touchdowns last year, and he was also good with his legs. On top of that, Retzlaff seemed to play better in bigger moments, and his absence will crush this offense.

The positive is that LJ Martin is back after rushing for 5.2 yards per carry and looking like a real player last season. He'll also be running behind a line that should be rock solid.

It's just fair to wonder how much all of that will matter with QB being such a big question mark. The wide receiver room is also pretty thin outside of Chase Roberts.

DEFENSE
You'll see some really good players when looking at the BYU defensive line and linebacking corps. Defensive tackle Keanu Tanuvasa should be a future pro, and the same can be said about linebackers Jack Kelly and Isaiah Glasker. However, only four total starters from last year are back, and that's a lot of production to replace.

The Cougars also lost a lot in the secondary, which was a strength a year ago. In this conference, which is deep at the quarterback position, it's hard not to worry about what that'll mean for the entire unit.

OUTLOOK
With Sitake at the helm, it's going to be hard to keep BYU down for long. However, it isn't fair to expect seven wins out of a team that just lost its starting quarterback. BYU could start 3-0 with an easy early-season schedule, but Big 12 play will be a problem if the Cougars can't beat teams through the air. So, even though it's very difficult to win in Provo, I can't suggest anything but an Under here.

prediction

UNDER 6.5 WINS

CINCINNATI
BEARCATS

Head Coach: Scott Satterfield (3rd)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 4-7-1 ATS, 4-7-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

15 OFFENSE: 7 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	vs. Nebraska	+4.4	53
9/6	BOWLING GREEN	-18.4	29.5
9/13	NORTHWESTERN ST	-59.7	-11
9/27	at Kansas	+6.1	49.5
10/4	IOWA ST	+3.1	51.5
10/11	UCF	-4.5	44.5
10/18	at Oklahoma St	-1.9	41.5
10/25	BAYLOR	+4.6	53
11/1	at Utah	+10	53
11/15	ARIZONA	-5.9	42.5
11/22	BYU	+0.6	49
11/29	at TCU	+8.5	52

SOS
41.58
(#66 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.5/0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
30-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
15-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	24	88	25	57
YARDS PER POINT	16.6	112	15.2	37
PLAYS PER GAME	70.8	44		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:03	21		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	41.4%	51	39.6%	69
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	399	48	380	66
YARDS PER PLAY	5.6	58	6	92
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.9	69		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	175.8	41	159.2	76
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.9	30	4.6	89
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	33.1	39		
COMPLETION %	63.2%	42	62.1%	79
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	223.2	64	220.8	63
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.7	97	7.9	95
TURNOVERS	1.4	55	1.2	94

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

46.0 CONFERENCE: #11 of 16
NATIONAL: #56 of 136

Scott Satterfield's looking for a Year 3 leap with Cincinnati. Last year, the Bearcats won five games, which was an improvement after a three-win season in 2023. Well, let's see what a third offseason will do. Appalachian State won seven games in Satterfield's second year with the program, then the team won 11 games in his third year.

Cincinnati's roster is also a lot better than you'd think — especially on offense. When you combine that with the fact that the Bearcats have one of the easier schedules in the Big 12, it doesn't feel like bowl eligibility is out of the question.

The season opener against Nebraska, in Kansas City, will tell us a lot about this team.

OFFENSE
It's hard not to love this offense. Quarterback Brendan Sorsby is big, confident and can make plays with his arm and his legs. A big season isn't out of the question with the offensive line expected to be good, plus all the pass-catching talent he'll have in the fold.

In tight end Joe Royer, the Bearcats have one of the best pass-catching weapons in the conference. I'm also looking forward to seeing Tawee Walker run behind an offensive line that brings back three starters and should turn heads this year. Walker had two 100-yard games for Wisconsin last season, despite playing in an offense that couldn't move the ball through the air.

This might not be the sexiest-looking depth chart in the Big 12, but don't be surprised if this offense holds its own against everyone.

DEFENSE
Cincinnati has been strong along the defensive line since Satterfield took over, but getting after the passer has been an issue. But the Bearcats should be better with Dontay Corleone, Mikah Coleman and Jalen Hunt all healthy. Marquaze Parker and Jaylon White-McClain could also add some juice getting into the opposing backfield.

Cincinnati is also experienced when it comes to the linebacker spots, where Jiquan Sanks has the potential to emerge as a star.

I'm also pretty high on the defensive backs here. The Bearcats lost a lot from last year, but they did really well in the portal — especially adding All-Sun Belt first-teamer Matthew McDoom at corner.

OUTLOOK
At plus-money odds, I'd grab the Over on 6.5 wins for Cincinnati. The defensive backs will be the swing group for this team. If the transfers they brought in end up hitting, this is a team that should handle its business at home. And they should be able to compete in road games against Kansas and Oklahoma State. Doing all of that should be enough for seven wins, and I'm not sure eight is out of the question.

prediction

OVER 6.5 WINS

COLORADO
BUFFALOES

Head Coach: Deion Sanders (3rd)
2024 Record: 9-4 SU & ATS, 6-6-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

11 OFFENSE: 3
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/29	GEORGIA TECH	+2.8	52
9/6	DELAWARE	-24.3	25.5
9/12	at Houston	+0.1	44.5
9/20	WYOMING	-16	34
9/27	BYU	-0.5	49
10/4	at TCU	+7.9	52
10/11	IOWA ST	+2	51.5
10/25	at Utah	+9.4	53
11/1	ARIZONA	-7	42.5
11/8	at West Virginia	-1.1	43
11/22	ARIZONA ST	+6.5	56
11/29	at Kansas St	+11.5	55

SOS
46.28
(#34 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/-0.3
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
28-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
16-1

CFP CHAMPION
300-1

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	33.1	23	22.8	32
YARDS PER POINT	11.3	3	15.1	41
PLAYS PER GAME	67.3	80		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:16	110		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	39.2%	73	38.6%	58
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	373.1	72	343.8	35
YARDS PER PLAY	5.5	68	4.7	17
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	26.5	132		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	65.7	134	150.9	61
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	2.5	133	3.9	37
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.3	21		
COMPLETION %	73.0%	2	57.0%	13
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	307.4	8	192.9	29
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.2	24	6.3	16
TURNOVERS	1.2	38	2.3	2

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

47.0 CONFERENCE: #10 of 16
NATIONAL: #49 of 136

For the first time in a long time, there's silence surrounding this program. Travis Hunter, who won the Heisman Trophy last year, was drafted second overall by the Jacksonville Jaguars, and Shedeur Sanders, who slid in the draft, is off to the Cleveland Browns. But Deion Sanders is still in Boulder. And as long as Coach Prime is around, the Buffaloes are going to be talented. This year is no exception.

Colorado continues to do a good job on the recruiting trail, and transfers clearly want to be a part of Prime's program.

The Buffs probably aren't looking at matching the nine wins they posted last year, especially with a very difficult schedule. But the Buffs aren't going to disappear.

OFFENSE
Sanders threw for 4,134 yards with 37 touchdowns last year, and he always seemed to deliver in clutch situations. So, replacing him is going to be difficult. Fortunately, Coach Prime added a five-star recruit in JuJu Lewis, and he also got Liberty star Kaidon Salter in the transfer portal. Between those two, Colorado should be in decent shape under center.

If you want to worry about something, direct your attention to the wide receivers. Hunter had 96 catches for 1,258 yards and 15 touchdowns, so he'll be missed dearly as a pass-catching weapon. And the group of wideouts the Buffs have right now is lacking in talent and experience.

Also, while the Colorado offensive line should be solid, we haven't seen a commitment to the running game.

DEFENSE
Hunter's presence will also be missed on the defensive side of the ball, as he was a lockdown corner in addition to a playmaker. However, in DJ McKinney, the Buffaloes do have a good corner to shadow the opponent's top guy. They also have some other transfers coming over that started last year, so the secondary might not be a problem.

The linebackers are also expected to be solid. It's the defensive line that is the biggest question mark. Colorado has some experienced players back, but the high-end talent isn't there. That means defensive line coach Warren Sapp will need to coach his butt off.

Unfortunately, despite having eight returning starters, matching last year's 4.7 YPP allowed isn't in the cards.

OUTLOOK
Colorado isn't going to be a doormat in the Big 12, but it's hard to imagine the Buffaloes getting to seven wins. I think Colorado will beat Delaware, Wyoming, BYU and Arizona, and a road meeting with Houston is winnable. The same probably goes for a home game against Georgia Tech to start the season. But that's only six wins when looking at the schedule, and some of them are iffy.

prediction

UNDER 6.5 WINS

HOUSTON
COUGARS

Head Coach: Willie Fritz (2nd)
2024 Record: 4-8 SU & 6-6 ATS, 2-10 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

15
OFFENSE: 8
DEFENSE: 7

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	STEPH F AUSTIN	-21.2	26
9/6	at Rice	-14	28
9/12	COLORADO	-0.1	47
9/26	at Oregon St	-1.6	39.5
10/4	TEXAS TECH	+6.4	53.5
10/11	at Oklahoma St	-0.4	41.5
10/18	ARIZONA	-4.2	42.5
10/25	at Arizona St	+13.7	56
11/1	WEST VIRGINIA	-3.8	43
11/7	at UCF	+2.7	44.5
11/22	TCU	+5	52
11/29	at Baylor	+11	53

SOS
43.96
(#55 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.3/0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
35-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
16-1

CFP CHAMPION
800-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	14	130	22.9	34
YARDS PER POINT	20.5	131	14.1	78
PLAYS PER GAME	61.8	127		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:10	62		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	27.6%	131	36.5%	38
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	287.5	127	324	20
YARDS PER PLAY	4.7	122	5.1	35
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.8	71		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	134.8	86	135.2	38
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.8	93	3.9	40
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	23.3	124		
COMPLETION %	65.0%	29	60.1%	50
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	152.7	124	188.8	22
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.5	110	6.8	41
TURNOVERS	2.3	133	1.6	41

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

44.5 CONFERENCE: #13 of 16
NATIONAL: #59 of 136

Willie Fritz went 23-4 in his final two seasons with Tulane, and he had been flirting with big jobs for years. Fritz's first year in Texas didn't go very well, as Houston finished 4-8 overall and 3-6 in conference. However, Fritz has everything he needs to win here, as Texas is rich with talented football players and Houston's boosters aren't shy about spending.

This season, expectations aren't outrageously high, but Fritz does have 16 players with starting experience in the lineup. And given what we have seen from his teams in the past, it's probably safe to say he won't field one of the nation's bottom-five scoring offenses again. If the offense does move to the middle of the pack, that should be enough for the Cougars to start moving in the right direction.

OFFENSE
Houston is hoping that quarterback Conner Weigman, once viewed as a future star at Texas A&M, just needed a change of scenery. Weigman will be working behind a line that has three returning starters, along with two massive transfers that look ready for action.

When Weigman has time to throw, he can accurately deliver the ball to every part of the field, and this is a quarterback-friendly system. Weigman is also solid as a runner.

Houston also has some real playmakers, and tight end Tanner Koziol could end up turning heads after a big year at Ball State. There's also some good running backs in H-Town, and Fritz's teams generally run well.

Realistically, the Cougars can only go up after averaging 14.0 PPG last year.

DEFENSE
Houston has seven players with starting experience back from last year, and this team gave up only 22.9 PPG. The Cougars also gave up only 5.1 YPP, which was good for 35th in the country.

Houston does have a new defensive coordinator in Austin Armstrong, so things will be a little different. But Armstrong is viewed as a rising star, so he should be able to make this work.

The Cougars have a lot of size along the defensive line, and they also have a good looking secondary. If the linebacking corps exceeds expectations, this will be a sturdy defense.

OUTLOOK
The Cougars will play home games against Stephen F Austin, Colorado, Arizona, West Virginia and TCU, and they also have road games against Rice, Oregon State, Oklahoma State and UCF. That's about as manageable of a schedule as you can possibly ask for in a conference like this, and I like the talent this team has on both sides of the ball. That's enough for me to bank on seven wins with a coach I trust.

prediction

OVER 6.5 WINS

IOWA STATE
CYCLONES

Head Coach: Matt Campbell (10th)
2024 Record: 11-3 SU & 8-6 ATS, 8-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

13
OFFENSE: 7 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 6

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/23	vs. Kansas St	+0.9	55
8/30	S DAKOTA	-13.4	40.5
9/6	IOWA	-0.8	53
9/13	at Arkansas St	-15.5	33.5
9/27	ARIZONA	-11.5	42.5
10/4	at Cincinnati	-3.1	46
10/11	at Colorado	-2	47
10/25	BYU	-5	49
11/1	ARIZONA ST	+2	56
11/8	at TCU	+3	52
11/22	KANSAS	-4.6	49.5
11/29	at Oklahoma St	-7.4	41.5

SOS
46.72
(#31 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
11-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+900

CFP CHAMPION
200-1

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	31.8	31	24.5	52
YARDS PER POINT	13.2	41	14.7	64
PLAYS PER GAME	73.5	16		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:44	11		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	42.3%	42	37.8%	52
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	421.1	31	358.5	50
YARDS PER PLAY	5.7	52	5.8	83
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38	40		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	166.2	53	189.5	105
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.4	63	5.5	125
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.2	32		
COMPLETION %	58.0%	100	52.3%	2
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	254.8	37	169	3
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.4	58	6.4	23
TURNOVERS	1.2	35	1.8	19

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

51.5 CONFERENCE: #7 of 16
NATIONAL: #35 of 136

The Big 12 Championship Game didn't go as hoped, as Iowa State got rocked by Arizona State. However, last year was the best in program history. Matt Campbell has done nothing but excellent work since arriving in Ames, but he had never reached double-digit wins. He smashed through that ceiling with 11 last year, including a bowl win over Miami in front of a busted looking strawberry Pop-Tart, which was resurrected earlier in the day.

Hitting 10 or more wins this year would take another spectacular coaching job, as Iowa State lost a ton of key pieces from last season. But some of the main ones are back, and Campbell has done more with less.

OFFENSE
There's a lot of roster turnover here, but the team is in good shape along the line. Three starters are back, and the two others will be guys that played in 2023.

The Cyclones also have Rocco Becht back after a season in which he threw for 3,505 yards and 25 touchdowns while also rushing for eight scores. Becht is a gamer, capable of beating teams with his arm and his legs. He also manufactured several game-winning drives last year, so he's a proven winner and should only be better in Year 3.

Iowa State also returns its two main backs, Abu Sama and Carson Hansen. The only spot on offense in which the Cyclones have question marks is at receiver, but they brought in some good transfers — including ECU star Chase Sowell.

DEFENSE
Iowa State couldn't stop the run last year, as the team gave up 5.4 yards per carry and gave up a ton of explosive plays. That's why the Cyclones were just 82nd in the nation in YPP allowed (5.8). Iowa State now has to deal with several defensive linemen having left, but maybe getting some fresh bodies in there will be good.

The real problem is that they lost some studs in the secondary, and they'll be replacing them with younger players and unproven transfers. Fortunately, star corner Jontez Williams is back and fully capable of defending top wideouts on an island. Will others step up and help him? The team also lost most of its reliable linebackers. The good news is that this program has always developed players well.

OUTLOOK
Iowa State still has an elite coach and a great quarterback. That really should be enough for the Cyclones to find a way to eight wins. There's undoubtedly some uncertainty here, but the schedule isn't awful. After a neutral-field meeting with Kansas State, in Ireland, on August 23rd, the team should rattle off four wins in a row. Then, some of the tougher games on the schedule will be played at home.

prediction
OVER 7.5 WINS

KANSAS
JAYHAWKS

Head Coach: Lance Leipold (5th)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & ATS, 5-6-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

10 OFFENSE: 5 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 5

schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/23	FRESNO ST	-14.7	37.5
8/29	WAGNER	-53	0
9/6	at Missouri	+6.6	53.5
9/20	WEST VIRGINIA	-9.2	43
9/27	CINCINNATI	-6.1	46
10/4	at UCF	-2.2	44.5
10/11	at Texas Tech	+6.5	53.5
10/25	KANSAS ST	+2.8	55
11/1	OKLAHOMA ST	-10.5	41.5
11/8	at Arizona	-4.6	42.5
11/22	at Iowa St	+4.6	51.5
11/28	UTAH	+0.4	53

SOS
42.88
(#60 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/0
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
18-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
11-1

CFP CHAMPION
300-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	28	53	28.1	79
YARDS PER POINT	14.7	77	14.6	69
PLAYS PER GAME	64.6	109		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:04	36		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	50.0%	2	44.1%	101
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	410.9	39	409.9	98
YARDS PER PLAY	6.4	12	6.1	102
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.8	43		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	201.3	16	160.6	79
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.3	16	4.6	82
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	25.9	112		
COMPLETION %	56.8%	107	63.7%	99
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	209.6	85	249.3	105
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.1	30	8.4	110
TURNOVERS	1.4	55	1.5	54

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

49.5 CONFERENCE: #8 of 16
NATIONAL: #41 of 136

Heading into last season, this program looked like it was on a rocket ship. In Lance Leipold's first year, the Jayhawks went 2-10 overall and 1-8 in conference. Then, in Year 2, Kansas went 6-7 overall and 3-6 in conference. After that came the breakout. In 2024, the team went 9-4 overall and 5-4 in Big 12 play. The Jayhawks also won their bowl game against UNLV. All of that success played a role in a substantial financial investment in the program's facilities.

Unfortunately, last season was a mess. The team went 5-7 overall and 4-5 in conference play. The defense was a disaster, which led to defensive coordinator Brian Borland retiring. DK McDonald will take over there.

Expectations aren't high in Lawrence this season, but this roster isn't bad. And Leipold seems to do his best work when nobody believes in him.

OFFENSE
Last season, Kansas was a top-10 team in adjusted EPA per play (0.16), which is interesting because they got away from the offense that made Jalon Daniels great. Still, Daniels looked like the dual-threat star he is in the second half of the year, which is why the Jayhawks went 4-2 in their final six games.

Kansas is now going back to an offense that will feature more read-option, which is where Daniels thrives, the offensive line is expected to be a strength and running back Daniel Hishaw Jr. has the potential to be a stud. So, if some of the new pass catchers can step up, there isn't much preventing this from being an elite group.

DEFENSE
Nobody in the conference returns fewer contributors than Kansas, and working in a new coordinator on top of that won't be easy. But McDonald's last few stops were with Iowa State and the Philadelphia Eagles, so he has been around some great coaches. Many believe he'll do a good job in Lawrence.

The Jayhawks also hit the portal extremely hard. They should be solid along the defensive line, and there's talent at linebacker and defensive back.

I don't expect a massive leap from the unit, but finishing within the top 75 in YPP allowed — after a year outside the top 100 — seems reasonable.

OUTLOOK
Putting Daniels behind a solid offensive line, while having an average defense, is a recipe for success. However, I don't see eight wins when looking at this schedule. The Big 12 is simply too good to expect the Jayhawks to consistently win on the road, and I'm not sure their home schedule is as easy as it needs to be for this high of a win total. Kansas would likely have to beat Missouri in order for the Over to be in play, and I'm not sure I see that happening.

prediction

UNDER 7.5 WINS

KANSAS STATE
WILDCATS

Head Coach: Chris Klieman (7th)
2024 Record: 9-4 SU & 4-9 ATS, 6-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

10 OFFENSE: 5 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 5

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/23	vs. Iowa St	-6.6	51.5
8/30	N DAKOTA	-34.3	24.5
9/6	ARMY	-17.2	40.5
9/12	at Arizona	-10.1	42.5
9/27	UCF	-14.2	44.5
10/4	at Baylor	+0.6	53
10/11	TCU	-6.4	52
10/25	at Kansas	-2.8	49.5
11/1	TEXAS TECH	-5	53.5
11/15	at Oklahoma St	-10.8	41.5
11/22	at Utah	+1.1	53
11/29	COLORADO	-11.5	47

SOS
45.23
(#42 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3.2/0
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+550

MAKE PLAYOFF
+350

CFP CHAMPION
100-1

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	30	41	24.8	56
YARDS PER POINT	14.2	63	14.5	72
PLAYS PER GAME	66.4	89		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:22	84		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	41.3%	52	38.0%	53
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	425.3	29	360.8	51
YARDS PER PLAY	6.4	11	5.2	50
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.7	72		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	210.2	12	125.6	30
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.9	2	3.8	32
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	29.7	74		
COMPLETION %	57.9%	102	58.7%	34
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	215.2	78	235.3	85
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.3	68	7.1	52
TURNOVERS	1.2	38	1.3	80

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

55.0 CONFERENCE: #2 of 16
NATIONAL: #23 of 136

After going 69-6 and winning four national championships with North Dakota State, Chris Klieman is 48-28 through six seasons with Kansas State. The 57-year-old is clearly one of the best coaches in the country, which is why we have seen the Wildcats win at least nine games in each of the last three seasons. However, people are waiting for the big breakthrough in the Little Apple. Klieman did finish in first in the Big 12 in 2022, and the team beat TCU in the Big 12 Championship Game. But an appearance in the College Football Playoff is the ultimate goal.

If Klieman is going to get this team to the promised land, one would think it'll happen in one of the next two seasons. Quarterback Avery Johnson is entering his junior year in Manhattan, and the Wildcats have to be thinking that they can capitalize on his special talent eventually.

OFFENSE
Johnson threw for 2,712 yards with 25 touchdowns and 10 picks last year, and he also ran for 605 yards and seven scores. He's electric when he tucks the ball and runs, and he's only getting better at processing the field as a passer.

Johnson's play was a big part of the reason Kansas State averaged 6.4 YPP, which was right up there with the best teams in college football. This year, things could be even better.

The Wildcats have a good offensive line, Dylan Edwards is a solid running back and the program added Purdue transfer Jaron Tibbs to a receiver group that already includes stud Jayce Brown. All the pieces are in place.

DEFENSE
Kansas State gave up only 3.8 yards per rush last year, and the team was also eighth in the nation in EPA per rush allowed (-0.12). This team was really good along the line, and that will once again be a strength with tackle Damian Ilalio having reliable bodies around him.

The Wildcats also have one of the best linebackers in the nation in Austin Romaine, who was a second-team All-Big 12 performer last year. The rest of the linebacking corps is solid, too.

Kansas State just has some question marks in the secondary. The passing defense was a weakness last year, so they completely overhauled the personnel. They desperately need some of the offseason moves to hit.

OUTLOOK
Kansas State's Ireland game against Iowa State is a genuine toss-up, but there's a path to nine wins without getting that one. The Wildcats will just have to hold serve at home, and they'll also need to go on the road and handle teams like Arizona, Kansas and Oklahoma State. Doing that will go a long way towards this Over, which feels like the right call for a team that has the potential to make the Big 12 Championship Game this year.

OVER 8.5 WINS

OKLAHOMA STATE
COWBOYS

Head Coach: Mike Gundy (21st)
2024 Record: 3-9 SU & 3-9 ATS, 7-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

10 OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 6

SOS
45.65
(#36 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/0.2
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
55-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
30-1

CFP CHAMPION
500-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	25.6	74	37	124
YARDS PER POINT	14.7	78	13.8	84
PLAYS PER GAME	67.6	77		
TIME OF POSSESSION	26:51	126		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	35.4%	105	47.8%	122
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	376.8	69	511.2	132
YARDS PER PLAY	5.6	65	6.7	127
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.8	124		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	113	111	223.4	128
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.9	82	5.5	126
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.6	16		
COMPLETION %	58.9%	95	63.6%	97
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	263.8	25	287.8	130
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7	82	8.6	120
TURNOVERS	2.1	128	1.3	76

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

41.5 CONFERENCE: #16 of 16
NATIONAL: #70 of 136

Last season was a strange one in Stillwater. After reaching double digits in wins in two of the previous three seasons, Oklahoma State went 3-9 overall and 0-9 in Big 12 play. Gundy hadn't had a losing record with the Cowboys since his first year with the program, which was all the way back in 2005.

Gundy's probably not on the hot seat. He's 169-88 in his time with Oklahoma State, and he has passed up some big opportunities to stick around. But there is some real uncertainty surrounding the program for the first time in a while, and the roster is definitely one of the Big 12's weakest heading into the new season.

OFFENSE
History suggests we should never worry about an Oklahoma State offense, but the team only averaged 27.2 points per game last year and found a way to crater a running game that featured a flat-out star in Ollie Gordon.

This year, the Cowboys will have five new players starting along the offensive line, their starting quarterback will be somebody that has never thrown a pass at the collegiate level and the running back situation isn't getting better with a talent like Gordon out the door.

Of course, Gundy might be able to make this all work. He's a mastermind and the system is still in place. But it's hard to see the positives here.

DEFENSE
The Oklahoma State defense was abysmal last season. Only five teams allowed more than the 6.7 YPP the Cowboys gave up, and Oklahoma State also allowed 35.6 PPG.

Gundy and his staff are hoping some transfers can fix that. While only three players return from last year's defense, the Cowboys are set to have three new starters that started for their teams last year.

There's a chance the linebackers end up being decent, especially with some injured players from last year being healthier. But it's hard to be optimistic about the D-Line and the secondary.

OUTLOOK
Stillwater really shouldn't be an easy place to win, but opponents were unbothered in Boone Pickens Stadium last year. This season, I'm not sure things will be any different. Oklahoma State should be able to beat Tennessee-Martin and Tulsa at home, but I'm not sure the Cowboys will be big favorites against anybody else. I also don't trust this roster in Big 12 road games — including against Arizona and UCF. I like the Under.

prediction

UNDER 5.5 WINS

TCU
HORNED FROGS

Head Coach: Sonny Dykes (4th)
2024 Record: 9-4 SU & 6-7 ATS, 7-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

14
OFFENSE: 6 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
9/1	at North Carolina	-3	46.5
9/13	ABILENE CHRISTIAN	-28.3	26
9/20	SMU	+0.7	55.5
9/26	at Arizona St	+6.5	56
10/4	COLORADO	-7.9	47
10/11	at Kansas St	+6.4	55
10/18	BAYLOR	-1.5	53
10/25	at West Virginia	-6.2	43
11/8	IOWA ST	-3	51.5
11/15	at BYU	-0.1	49
11/22	at Houston	-5	44.5
11/29	CINCINNATI	-8.5	46

schedule

SOS
47.84
(#21 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/-0.2
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+850

MAKE PLAYOFF
+700

CFP CHAMPION
250-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	32.5	28	26.7	70
YARDS PER POINT	13.1	35	13.6	87
PLAYS PER GAME	69.8	57		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:28	107		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	43.9%	28	44.6%	105
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	427	26	363.8	53
YARDS PER PLAY	6.1	25	5	32
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.3	114		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	112.8	112	168.9	91
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.7	96	4.4	72
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38.2	14		
COMPLETION %	65.9%	23	58.5%	32
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	314.2	6	194.9	32
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.2	25	6.1	11
TURNOVERS	1.8	116	1.3	80

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

52.0 CONFERENCE: #6 of 16
NATIONAL: #34 of 136

Sonny Dykes took TCU to the College Football Playoff National Championship Game in his first year with the program. However, the Horned Frogs suffered a big time hangover season in 2023, going 5-7 overall and 3-6 in Big 12 play. So, it wasn't clear what to expect heading into 2024. But Dykes and TCU bounced back in 2024, going 9-4 overall and ending the year with a win over Louisiana in the New Mexico Bowl.

The Horned Frogs are now looking to take things a little further than last year, as some of their key guys are back. Their win total only sits at 6.5, partly because of a tough schedule, but there's no reason this team can't turn some heads and sneak into the Big 12 Championship Game.

OFFENSE
When Dykes has a quarterback he can trust, his offenses can be pretty damn dangerous. Well, Dykes can trust Josh Hoover. Last year, Hoover was seventh in the nation in passing yards (3,949). He also set a single-season TCU record with that mark, and there's no reason he can't build on that in 2025. Hoover has a big arm, he's aggressive in testing windows and he craves big moments. He'll also be working behind an improved offensive line.

The issue with TCU is that the running game was nonexistent last year, and that put a lot of pressure on Hoover. Will that change in 2025? Also, it's not yet clear who Hoover can count on as his targets. Eric McAlister was good as a No. 2 last year, but can he be a No. 1? And how will Idaho transfer Jordan Dwyer do after catching 78 passes for 1,192 yards and 12 touchdowns against worse competition last season? If those two ball out, TCU might go from top 25 in YPP (6.1) to top 10.

DEFENSE
This has the potential to be a very good Horned Frogs defense. Last year, in Andy Avalos' first season as TCU's defensive coordinator, the team was outside the top 100 in adjusted EPA per play allowed (0.05). However, the Horned Frogs were very good against the pass, and they have star safety Bud Clark back. They also added a stud corner in Washington transfer Elijah Jackson.

If TCU can avoid big plays over the top, this defense could be one of the strongest in the Big 12. That's because they're stacked when looking at the defensive line and linebackers.

OUTLOOK
TCU's schedule isn't exactly a walk in the park, which is why the team's win total sits so low. However, I have some faith in the Horned Frogs going on the road and winning tough games, as Hoover should be one of the best quarterbacks in the conference this year. I'm especially looking at road games against North Carolina, West Virginia and BYU as the winnable ones. Doing well in that trio of games and taking care of business at home should amount to seven victories.

prediction

OVER 6.5 WINS

TEXAS TECH
RED RAIDERS

Head Coach: Joey McGuire (4th)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 7-5-1 ATS, 9-4 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

21 OFFENSE: 10 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 11

SOS
39.68
(#69 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.5/-0.3
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+600

MAKE PLAYOFF
+450

CFP CHAMPION
100-1

2024 stats

	OFFESE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	36.4	4	33.5	113
YARDS PER POINT	12.5	18	13.5	89
PLAYS PER GAME	79.9	1		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:30	48		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	48.2%	8	34.6%	27
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	456.7	7	452.9	120
YARDS PER PLAY	5.7	53	6.4	113
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.8	57		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	166.5	51	161.3	81
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.5	50	4.8	96
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	41.2	6		
COMPLETION %	61.9%	60	63.4%	95
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	290.2	10	291.6	132
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7	80	8.3	108
TURNOVERS	1.8	108	1.8	20

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
53.5 CONFERENCE: #3 of 16
NATIONAL: #26 of 136

In July, On3's Pete Nakos had Texas Tech at No. 2 on a list of the 10 biggest NIL spenders in college football, according to a survey. And pretty much every report you'll find will tell you that Texas Tech is paying its athletes an exorbitant amount of money.

The Red Raiders added all kinds of talent through the transfer portal, which is why the team has 21 players with starting experience set to play this year. The question is, can you piece together a team through "free agency" and win a good conference? Indiana provided some hope in finding success with a completely new crop of players, but Curt Cignetti is one of the best coaches in college football and the Hoosiers had an easy schedule. There won't be many easy wins for the Red Raiders in Big 12 play.

OFFENSE
The best place to start is with the offensive line. Joey McGuire has three starters back, but he also went nuts adding full-time starters in the portal. Apparently, he's happy with that group now.

The improved line should help USC transfer Quenten Joyner fill the shoes of star running back Tahj Brooks, and he'll have help from Cameron Dickey and J'Koby Williams.

The Red Raiders are also stacked at receiver, where Miami (OH) transfer Reggie Virgil, who had 819 yards and nine touchdowns last season, could become a household name — especially with Caleb Douglas and Coy Eakin providing him with space.

Oddly enough, the biggest question mark is at quarterback. Behren Morton is injury prone and a little unproven. But Texas Tech showed a lot of faith in him by standing pat in the portal.

DEFENSE
The linebackers are tremendous, as Jacob Rodriguez and Ben Roberts return to lead a talented group. The Red Raiders also have an insane amount of talent — and future pros — along the line, where they also have depth.

If Texas Tech's portal additions in the secondary hit, this unit should be great. And not only did the coaching staff add starters, but they targeted guys with size and length.

Last year, Tech gave up 6.4 YPP and was outside the top 100 in that category. With this type of payroll, anything outside a jump to the top 40 would be a disappointment.

OUTLOOK
In order for Texas Tech to get to nine wins, the team probably needs to beat both Houston and West Virginia on the road. That's really what it comes down to when looking at the schedule. Obviously, the Red Raiders will be significantly more talented than both squads. But I tend to think McGuire will regret not upgrading at the quarterback spot, and I think the team will feel that most in road games like those. I'm going Under.

prediction
UNDER 8.5 WINS

UCF
KNIGHTS

Head Coach: Scott Frost (1st)
2024 Record: 4-8 SU & 5-7 ATS, 8-4 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

9 OFFENSE: 3
DEFENSE: 6

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	JACKSONVILLE ST	-15.9	31
9/6	N CAROLINA A&T	-47.6	0
9/20	NORTH CAROLINA	-0.9	46.5
9/27	at Kansas St	+14.2	55
10/4	KANSAS	+2.2	49.5
10/11	at Cincinnati	+4.5	46
10/18	WEST VIRGINIA	-4.3	43
11/1	at Baylor	+11.6	53
11/7	HOUSTON	-2.7	44.5
11/15	at Texas Tech	+12	53.5
11/22	OKLAHOMA ST	-5.6	41.5
11/29	at BYU	+7.7	49

SOS
42.43
(#63 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.8/-0.5
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
55-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
30-1

CFP CHAMPION
500-1

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	28	53	29.1	84
YARDS PER POINT	15.4	93	12.2	121
PLAYS PER GAME	70.5	50		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:14	111		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	42.0%	46	45.6%	112
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	430.4	22	355.2	44
YARDS PER PLAY	6.1	26	5.2	46
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	42	12		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	229.4	7	125.3	29
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.5	10	3.6	23
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	26.2	109		
COMPLETION %	59.0%	90	66.1%	113
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	201	96	229.9	73
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.7	41	7.3	64
TURNOVERS	1.5	78	0.8	121

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
44.5 CONFERENCE: #12 of 16
NATIONAL: #58 of 136

"Sometimes you gotta go back… to actually move forward," said the great Matthew McConaughey, while trying to sell 2015 Lincoln MKCs. But that quote really feels like it was made for Scott Frost's eventual return to Orlando.

Frost led UCF to a perfect 13-0 record in 2017, and the Knights tried to claim a national title for that remarkable year. But Frost bounced from the "Bounce House" shortly after, taking the job at his alma mater of Nebraska. That experiment lasted only five years, and it was a disaster.

Now, Frost is back to revive a UCF program that collapsed after he left. Frost insists his heart wasn't fully in the Nebraska job, and he has outright said he regretted leaving the Knights. Let's now see if a renewed spark can lead to another golden era of UCF football.

OFFENSE
UCF needs to make the right decision at quarterback, where there's a very open competition between Indiana transfer Tayven Jackson, FAU transfer Cam Fancher and returner Jacurri Brown. McKenzie Milton, once Frost's star quarterback at UCF, is coaching this room, but can anybody provide even 50% of what Milton did as a dual-threat signal caller.

The running back and receiver groups also lack proven commodities, but the common theme is speed. Pretty much everybody Frost went out and got in the portal can fly, so expect to see several players break out.

The offensive line also looks to be decent, with three players with starting experience set to start — including left tackle Paul Rubelt, who has an NFL future.

DEFENSE
This defense might turn some heads. There's a lot of talent along the defensive line, and they're going to be able to get after the quarterback. Also, while they're breaking in all new starters at linebacker, most of them come from big schools. The one that didn't is Cole Kozlowski, who was one of the best defensive players in the FCS for Colgate.

Alex Grinch, the team's new defensive coordinator, just needs to work some magic with the secondary, but that has been his speciality throughout his up-and-down coaching career.

OUTLOOK
I'm not sure Frost will ever have UCF consistently competing atop the Big 12, but I think this reunion is going to work. He knows how to win in Orlando, where his uptempo offense used to wear opponents down. There's also enough talent in Florida for Frost to build something unique. I also believe Year 1 will be more successful than people think. UCF is incredibly tough to beat at home, and the team has seven home games against very beatable opponents. That said, the Knights might hit this without even winning a road game.

prediction

OVER 5.5 WINS

UTAH
UTES

Head Coach: Kyle Whittingham (21st)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 5-7 ATS, 4-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

17 OFFENSE: 10 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 7

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	at UCLA	-3.8	46.5
9/6	CAL POLY SLO	-46.7	10
9/13	at Wyoming	-16	34
9/20	TEXAS TECH	-2.9	53.5
9/27	at West Virginia	-7	43
10/11	ARIZONA ST	+0	56
10/18	at BYU	-0.9	49
10/25	COLORADO	-9.4	47
11/1	CINCINNATI	-10	46
11/15	at Baylor	+3	53
11/22	KANSAS ST	-1.1	55
11/28	at Kansas	-0.4	49.5

SOS
45.07
(#46 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3.1/-0.4
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+600

MAKE PLAYOFF
+450

CFP CHAMPION
110-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	21.3	108	22.5	30
YARDS PER POINT	14.7	79	15.3	33
PLAYS PER GAME	65.4	101		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:10	18		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	31.7%	127	27.8%	3
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	313.3	121	346	37
YARDS PER PLAY	4.8	115	5.1	37
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	33	99		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	125.5	97	134	36
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.8	90	3.9	45
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.2	69		
COMPLETION %	54.8%	118	53.2%	3
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	187.7	106	212	47
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.2	123	6.5	28
TURNOVERS	1.8	114	1.5	43

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
53.0 CONFERENCE: #4 of 16
NATIONAL: #28 of 136

The last few years have been disappointing for Utah. Quarterback Cam Rising's miserable injury luck got in the way of a Utes team that had the talent to do special things. Instead, Utah's quarterback play was a nightmare, and the team looked bad everywhere else as a result. The Utes are now just 13-12 since losing in the Rose Bowl in 2022, and some of the program's shine has worn off.

This year, Utah should get back on the map. Kyle Whittingham's coaching career is coming to an end, but there's still some hunger there. Whittingham is leaning into modernizing his offense, as he has Jason Beck, previously with New Mexico, coming over to change things up. Beck is bringing dynamic dual-threat signal caller Devon Dampier with him.

If the offensive changes work, the Utes could contend. They do have a tough schedule, but they're a tough opponent.

OFFENSE
In mid-July, Stormy Buonantony and Jonathan Von Tobel interviewed Utah State head coach Bronco Mendenhall on our live VSiN programming. JVT asked Mendenhall, who coached Dampier at New Mexico, what he thought of the new Utah quarterback. Mendenhall gushed about him, noting he has some of the star qualities that Bryce Perkins and Taysom Hill possessed. He then went on to say that Dampier might be one of the best quarterbacks in the Big 12.

Dampier is a special player. His passing needs some work, but he rushed for 1,166 yards and 19 scores last year. Don't be surprised if he looks much better as both a passer and a runner behind a stacked Utah O-Line.

The Utes also have playmakers everywhere, including some proven transfers. So, this unit could do big things.

DEFENSE
Whittingham's teams are always fundamentally sound on this side of the ball, and the group has plenty of talent. Lander Barton might be the best linebacker in the country, and the Utes are pretty strong in the front seven, in general.

Utah is also in great shape in the secondary, even with some of last year's studs taking big deals to go elsewhere.

Morgan Scalley should have another top 25 defense here.

OUTLOOK
We know what we're getting out of the Utah defense. That unit is going to be a nightmare to play against. But having a game-changing quarterback like Dampier could change everything for the Utes. That's why I'm having a hard time getting myself worried about the team's rough schedule. Utah is well-coached and loaded on both sides of the ball. The team is also impossible to beat at Rice-Eccles Stadium. So, not only should the Utes win eight games, but they might contend in this conference.

prediction
OVER 7.5 WINS

WEST VIRGINIA
MOUNTAINEERS

Head Coach: Rich Rodriguez (1st)
2024 Record: 6-7 SU & 5-8 ATS, 9-4 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

10 OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 6

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	ROBERT MORRIS	-36.8	9
9/6	at Ohio U	-2.3	38
9/13	PITTSBURGH	+2	47.5
9/20	at Kansas	+9.2	49.5
9/27	UTAH	+7	53
10/3	at BYU	+8.7	49
10/18	at UCF	+4.3	44.5
10/25	TCU	+6.2	52
11/1	at Houston	+3.8	44.5
11/8	COLORADO	+1.1	47
11/15	at Arizona St	+15.3	56
11/29	TEXAS TECH	+7.6	53.5

SOS
45.18
(#43 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/0
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
40-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
30-1

CFP CHAMPION
500-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	27.5	61	33.4	112
YARDS PER POINT	14.3	68	12.6	113
PLAYS PER GAME	72.3	28		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:36	13		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	42.8%	36	49.7%	130
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	393.1	53	419.8	102
YARDS PER PLAY	5.4	74	6.5	119
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	41.4	13		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	185.9	27	151.8	62
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.5	54	4.5	74
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.8	84		
COMPLETION %	59.7%	79	66.0%	111
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	207.2	88	267.9	120
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.2	71	9.3	132
TURNOVERS	1.5	70	0.9	114

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

43.0 CONFERENCE: #14 of 16
NATIONAL: #65 of 136

Rich Rodriguez's success at West Virginia ultimately landed him the Michigan job in 2008. Rodriguez won at least 10 games in his final three seasons in Morgantown, so he looked like he was ready for primetime. However, Rodriguez went just 15-22 in Ann Arbor, then he had an up-and-down six-year stretch with Arizona. That ended with Rodriguez being fired due to sexual harassment and hostile workplace accusations — which were dismissed in 2019.

Rodriguez was canned by Arizona in 2017 and had to wait until 2022 for another head coaching gig. That was a low-level job with Jacksonville State, but Rodriguez knocked it out of the park. In three seasons, Rodriguez racked up a 27-10 record with the Gamecocks.

Rodriguez is now back with his alma mater for the long haul. And now that they're in the Big 12, there's no reason he can't win big. Though it won't happen overnight.

OFFENSE
West Virginia doesn't have a single player back from last year's offensive line. Rodriguez did bring in a bunch of bodies through the portal, but the team will only have one starter — Tulsa's Walter Young Bear — that started games last year.

The questionable line makes it really hard to buy into this offense, even with running back Jahiem White back. The Mountaineers are unproven at quarterback and wide receiver, and they might not be able to run as well as they hope. The latter will be a problem with Rodriguez running a run-heavy spread.

DEFENSE
There are fewer question marks on defense, where defensive coordinator Zac Alley will likely start six full-time starters from last year. Some of them come from the transfer portal, but it's better than nothing.

The defensive line should be a strength, as tackle Edward Vesterinen had a good year for West Virginia last year. The team also brought in AAC DPOY Jimmori Robinson, who is an electric pass rusher at defensive end.

The team just has to hope that the linebackers and corners they landed in the portal hit. But there's no reason they can't.

OUTLOOK
Rodriguez's return to West Virginia is very similar to Frost's return to UCF, but I don't see the Year 1 results being there in Morgantown. If the Mountaineers win the Backyard Brawl against Pitt on September 13th, they should be 3-0. However, that's not a given, and things get really difficult from there. A road game against UCF and home game against Colorado are the only two spots in which West Virginia should be confident. With that in mind, I see no reason not to go Under here. I don't trust the offense.

prediction

UNDER 5.5 WINS

BIG TEN
preview

The SEC frequently promotes its tagline/motto "It Just Means More". However, in terms of College Football National Championships, they have meant the most in the Big Ten, as this conference has produced the last two national champions (Michigan 2023, Ohio State 2024). The conference had four playoff teams and two in the semifinals last year, much to the consternation of the talking heads on ESPN.

The Big Ten has a chance of a three-peat with three of the top six choices on the odds board. Defending national champion Ohio State (5/1 national champions; 2/1 Big Ten) had 14 players chosen this past April in the 2025 NFL Draft and the attrition is not limited just to the player roster, but to the coaching staff as well as both coordinators depart.

James Franklin may have his best roster ever at Penn State (+750; +250) but is still seeking to win "the big one" despite two playoff victories last year.

Oregon (11/1; 3/1) won the Big Ten in its first season but ended up being crushed by the Buckeyes in the rematch at the Rose Bowl.

The surprise last season was Indiana (100/1; 35/1) making the CFP last season and having its best season (11-2) in program history with an entirely new coaching staff and roster. If not Indiana again, many in the media believe Illinois (150/1; 30/1) can be this year's dark horse with 19 returning starters from a 10-win club.

Michigan (25/1; +850) and USC (100/1; 25/1) were down in 2024 but the talent is there for rebounds in 2025.
Iowa, Nebraska, Washington, Minnesota, and Rutgers should all achieve bowl eligibility. Wisconsin, Michigan State, UCLA, Northwestern, and Purdue, with the only coaching change in the conference – Barry Odom (UNLV) – look like the bottom third.

2025 projected standings

TEAM	2024 SM PR	HOME FA	ROAD FA	SS (RANK)	ALL PRJW'S	ALL PRJL'S	CONF PRJW'S	CONF PRJL'S	DRAFTKINGS O/U
OHIO ST	69	3.1	0.1	46.8 (28)	10.3	1.7	7.7	1.3	10.5
PENN ST	68	2.7	0.7	45.28 (41)	10.5	1.6	7.5	1.5	10.5
OREGON	64	2.9	0.5	49.08 (15)	9.9	2.1	7.1	1.9	10.5
MICHIGAN	60	2.8	0.8	45.46 (38)	9.3	2.7	6.8	2.2	8.5
ILLINOIS	54.5	2.7	0.7	42.98 (59)	8.4	3.6	5.8	3.2	7.5
USC	55.5	2.4	-0.4	48.28 (19)	7.7	4.4	5.6	3.4	7.5
INDIANA	55	2.4	0	43.66 (57)	8.3	3.7	5.3	3.7	8.5
NEBRASKA	53	2.4	-0.1	44.3 (51)	7.7	4.3	5.0	4.0	7.5
MINNESOTA	49.5	2.6	0.1	42.88 (61)	7.0	5.0	4.5	4.5	7.5
WASHINGTON	51.5	2.8	-0.4	47.53 (23)	7.1	4.9	4.4	4.6	7.5
IOWA	53	2.8	0.3	47.28 (24)	6.8	5.2	4.3	4.7	6.5
WISCONSIN	49.5	2.2	0.1	52.03 (2)	5.1	6.9	3.2	5.8	5.5
RUTGERS	48	2.2	-0.2	46.98 (27)	5.8	6.2	3.1	5.9	5.5
UCLA	46.5	2.3	0.4	50.31 (9)	4.9	7.1	3.1	5.9	5.5
MICHIGAN ST	46.5	2.3	0	47.67 (22)	5.3	6.7	2.8	6.3	5.5
MARYLAND	42	2.4	-0.2	44.85 (47)	4.9	7.1	2.2	6.8	4.5
NORTHWESTERN	41	2.2	-0.3	47.07 (26)	4.1	7.9	2.0	7.0	3.5
PURDUE	35	2	0.2	49.19 (13)	2.7	9.3	1.0	8.0	2.5

ILLINOIS
FIGHTING ILLINI

Head Coach: Bret Bielema (5th)
2024 Record: 10-3 SU & 9-3-1 ATS, 5-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

19 OFFENSE: 10 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 9

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/29	W ILLINOIS	-53.2	4.5
9/6	at Duke	-4.3	48
9/13	W MICHIGAN	-28.8	28.5
9/20	at Indiana	+2.2	55
9/27	USC	-2.1	55.5
10/4	at Purdue	-18.2	35
10/11	OHIO ST	+11.9	69
10/25	at Washington	-0.9	51.5
11/1	RUTGERS	-9.4	48
11/15	MARYLAND	-15.4	42
11/22	at Wisconsin	-3.5	49.5
11/29	NORTHWESTERN	-16.5	41

SOS
42.98
(#59 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/0.7
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
30-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+500

CFP CHAMPION
150-1

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	26.9	64	23.5	41
YARDS PER POINT	13.2	38	16.5	13
PLAYS PER GAME	63.6	119		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:30	105		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	46.0%	14	45.8%	115
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	354.9	89	388.8	73
YARDS PER PLAY	5.6	64	5.4	61
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34	93		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	146.3	78	157.5	72
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.3	69	4.5	78
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	27	103		
COMPLETION %	59.3%	87	59.7%	46
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	208.7	86	231.3	77
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.7	39	6.7	39
TURNOVERS	1.2	38	1.3	71

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

54.5 CONFERENCE: #7 of 18
NATIONAL: #24 of 136

With Indiana's success last season, Illinois' surprising 10-4 season, its first double-digit win season since 2001, flew largely under the radar.

The Illini, picked 13th in the conference preseason poll, finished No. 16 in the AP Poll and are not under the radar in 2025 as they return 19 starters and Bret Bielema, who guided Wisconsin to three Rose Bowl appearances, knows his way around the Big Ten and keeps his coaching staff intact.

Illinois avoids Penn State, Oregon, and Michigan on the schedule but does host Ohio State and USC along with taking trips to Duke and Indiana.

OFFENSE
QB Luke Altmyer had an inconsistent 2023 season after transferring from Ole Miss but showed dramatic improvement last season with increases in passing yards (1883 to 2717), touchdown passes (13 to 22), and a reduction in turnovers with only six interceptions. Altmyer also gets support from an offensive line that returns all five starters. That line will be blocking for a trio of running backs including Kaden Feagin (744 yards L2Y), who missed half of the season with a hip injury, Aidan Laughery (589 yards), and Ca'Lil Valentine (212 yards).

The receiving corps is the question mark though as Pat Bryant and Zakhari Franklin are gone to the NFL and Josh McCray transferred to Georgia. Almost 70 percent of the receiving production has departed, so Hudson Clement, West Virginia's leading receiver last year (741 yards, 5 TD), must be the go-to guy immediately.

DEFENSE
The Illini got a boost when OLB Gabe Jacas elected to forego the NFL Draft. Jacas led Illinois in sacks (8), tackles for loss (13), forced fumbles (3) and quarterback hurries (10). However, he is the only established threat off the edge. A pair of Wisconsin transfers – Curt Neal and James Thompson Jr. – come in to help a defensive line hit hard by graduation.

LB Dylan Rosiek was the team's leading tackler before breaking his leg against Minnesota and missing the final four games of the season. He is expected to be back.

S Xavier Scott was first-team All-Big Ten last season and leads a talented veteran group that includes fellow safety Matthew Bailey, who led the team with 94 tackles.

OUTLOOK
On paper, Illinois should have everything to once again surprise in the Big Ten. However, they did catch all the breaks last season and went 5-1 in one-score games and won five games as outright underdogs. The Illini are probably a bit overpriced in the market with all the returning starters. They will be a typical physically tough team under Bielema, but the passing game lacks playmakers. The schedule will be much more difficult than last year's slate.

prediction

UNDER 8.5 WINS

INDIANA
HOOSIERS

Head Coach: Curt Cignetti (2nd)
2024 Record: 11-2 SU & 9-4 ATS, 9-4 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

15 OFFENSE: 8
DEFENSE: 7

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	OLD DOMINION	-22	35
9/6	KENNESAW ST	-35	22.5
9/12	INDIANA ST	-47.5	10.5
9/20	ILLINOIS	-2.2	54.5
9/27	at Iowa	+0.8	53
10/11	at Oregon	+11.9	64
10/18	MICHIGAN ST	-10.9	46.5
10/25	UCLA	-10.5	46.5
11/1	at Maryland	-10.6	42
11/8	at Penn St	+15.7	68
11/15	WISCONSIN	-7.8	49.5
11/28	at Purdue	-18	35

SOS
43.66
(#57 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.4/0
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
35-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+500

CFP CHAMPION
100-1

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	38.3	2	16.7	7
YARDS PER POINT	10.5	1	16.1	19
PLAYS PER GAME	67	82		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:23	51		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	45.2%	20	33.8%	21
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	403.5	43	267.6	2
YARDS PER PLAY	6	37	4.2	3
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37	54		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	151.9	74	85.9	2
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.1	77	2.9	3
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.3	91		
COMPLETION %	66.8%	19	63.3%	94
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	251.6	39	181.7	12
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.9	7	5.9	4
TURNOVERS	0.8	8	1.8	20

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

55.0 CONFERENCE: #6 of 18
NATIONAL: #22 of 136

Indiana was 9-27 and just 3-24 in Big Ten play before Curt Cignetti's arrival in Bloomington. The daunting task of turning around a dormant program was no big deal to Cignetti and his crew from James Madison. "I win. Google me."

No one could have fathomed, except for perhaps Cignetti, that Indiana, picked 17th in the Big Ten, would win 11 games and make the inaugural 12-team CFP. Granted, the schedule was highly favorable, but the Hoosiers took care of business to an average score of 41.3 to 15.6.

This year, the Hoosiers lose a great deal of production, but once again hit the portal hard and have 16 starters (including transfers) back and a schedule, while adding road games at Oregon and at Penn State, looks to be highly manageable for another successful season.

OFFENSE
The Hoosiers set records last season for touchdowns and had eight 40+ point games. QB Kurtis Rourke has gone to the NFL and Tino Sunseri takes the OC job at UCLA, but Fernando Mendoza (3,004 yards, 69% completion last season) transfers in from Cal. He is an upgrade from an athleticism standpoint and is behind a much better OL than he had in Berkeley with three returning starters and transfers Pat Coogan (Notre Dame) and Kahlil Benson, who returns to Bloomington after a season at Colorado.

Three of Indiana's four leading rushers are gone, but Maryland transfer Roman Hemby and UAB transfer Lee Beebe were both highly productive at their previous stops and Cignetti always says "production over potential."

The Hoosiers' top two receivers Elijah Sarratt (53-957-8), who came with Cignetti from James Madison, and Omar Cooper (28-594-7) also return.

DEFENSE
Indiana returns three All-Big Ten players from this unit – edge rusher Mikail Kamara (10 sacks, 68 QB hurries LY), MLB Aiden Fisher (118 tackles LY), and CB D'Angelo Ponds (3 INT, 9 PBU) – and all three came with Cignetti from James Madison.

Those three helped lead the Hoosiers to rank second nationally in total defense (256.3 YPG) and sixth in scoring defense (15.6 PPG).

The secondary looks to be the strength of the unit, but if the Hoosiers are to be as elite as they were last year defensively then its DL transfers will need to draw the attention that CJ West did to let Kamara run loose off the edge.

OUTLOOK
The Hoosiers have an easy non-conference schedule again and begin the 2025 campaign with four home games concluding with Illinois.

Granted, it is a big ask for Indiana to reach the CFP in back-to-back seasons, but the Hoosiers are far from a one-hit wonder. The NIL commitment combined with Cignetti and his support staff, who all received pay raises, has this program at a different level than Hoosier fans could have ever dreamed of just a couple of years ago. The 8.5-win total looks right, but nine is certainly doable.

prediction

OVER 8.5 WINS

IOWA
HAWKEYES

Head Coach: Kirk Ferentz (4th)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 6-6-1 ATS, 10-3 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

11
OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 5

schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	ALBANY	-41.6	14.5
9/6	at Iowa St	+0.8	51.5
9/13	MASSACHUSETTS	-35.2	21
9/19	at Rutgers	-3.1	48
9/27	INDIANA	-0.8	55
10/11	at Wisconsin	-1.6	49.5
10/18	PENN ST	+12.9	68
10/25	MINNESOTA	-6.2	49.5
11/8	OREGON	+8.7	64
11/15	at USC	+4.6	55.5
11/22	MICHIGAN ST	-9.3	46.5
11/28	at Nebraska	+2.1	53

SOS
47.28
(#24 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.8/0.3
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
35-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+900

CFP CHAMPION
180-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	26.7	67	19.3	15
YARDS PER POINT	11.9	5	17	11
PLAYS PER GAME	58.8	132		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:50	97		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	40.5%	58	37.1%	44
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	316.3	119	329.4	23
YARDS PER PLAY	5.4	76	5	31
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38.3	37		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	194.7	22	120.4	26
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.1	23	3.9	38
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	19.1	131		
COMPLETION %	62.0%	58	63.1%	90
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	121.6	131	209	44
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.4	116	6.4	24
TURNOVERS	1	24	1.8	20

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
53.0 CONFERENCE: #8 of 18
NATIONAL: #29 of 136

While it is difficult to call an eight-win season disappointing and Iowa was not expected to be a Big Ten title contender, the Hawkeyes were favored in 11 of 13 games last season and avoided the two Big Ten Championship Game participants (Oregon and Penn State) and still won only eight courtesy of blowing double-digit second half leads against Iowa State and in the Music City Bowl against Missouri.

Although the offense showed some improvement under first-year OC Tim Lester, the Hawkeyes could never truly find their footing as three different quarterbacks ended up starting games.

Ohio State and Michigan disappear from the 2025 schedule but are replaced by Oregon, Penn State, and Indiana. The good news is that all three of those are at Kinnick Stadium.

OFFENSE
It was thought that finally removing Brian Ferentz as OC and adding a QB with a higher ceiling (Cade McNamara from Michigan) would improve this unit and it did increase scoring from 15.4 to 27.7 PPG and gained nearly 100 yards more per game versus 2023. However, the ceiling was still too low and McNamara put up pedestrian numbers in his eight starts before injury.

This year, Iowa turns to the portal again with Mark Gronowski, a four-year starter and two-time FCS National Champion at South Dakota State, who gained 12,075 combined yards there, but missed spring due to shoulder surgery.

Kaleb Johnson ran for 1,537 and 21 touchdowns and departs, but Iowa has some depth at RB with Kamari Moulton and Jaziun Patterson returning behind three OL returning starters including first-team All-Big Ten C Logan Jones. The passing game remains a question with Gronowski's injury plus leading receiver Jacob Gill tallied only 411 yards and two touchdowns.

DEFENSE
There is some attrition on this side of the ball losing six starters, including first-team All-Big Ten LB and leading tackler Jay Higgins (124 tackles), but DC Phil Parker, one of college football's best defensive minds, always has a good unit here at Iowa and should have one again with three of four DL starters back.

The Hawkeyes did allow the most points and yards that they have in three seasons, but that still only amounted to 17.8 PPG and 318 YPG. The floor is still high for this group combined with the always nationally elite special teams.

OUTLOOK
Kirk Ferentz is the longest-tenured coach in the Big Ten entering his 27th season in Iowa City.

It is hard to bet against a program that has eclipsed seven wins in 17 of the last 26 seasons, but there is a lot riding on an FCS QB coming back from injury and a rebuilt defense. While they get the best teams on the schedule at home, the Hawkeyes still must visit Wisconsin, USC, and Nebraska in league play and those will likely be coin flip games.

prediction

UNDER 7.5 WINS

MARYLAND
TERRAPINS

Head Coach: Mike Locksley (7th)
2024 Record: 4-8 SU & 4-8 ATS, 9-3 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

10
OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 4

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	FLA ATLANTIC	-15.6	29.5
9/5	N ILLINOIS	-12.9	31
9/13	TOWSON	-23.3	21
9/20	at Wisconsin	+9.9	49.5
10/4	WASHINGTON	+6.7	51.5
10/11	NEBRASKA	+8.5	53
10/18	at UCLA	+7	46.5
11/1	INDIANA	+10.6	55
11/8	at Rutgers	+8.4	48
11/15	at Illinois	+15.4	54.5
11/22	MICHIGAN	+16.4	60
11/29	vs. Michigan St	+3.1	46.5

SOS
44.85
(#47 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.4/-0.2
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
500-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
60-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	22.4	100	31.4	102
YARDS PER POINT	16.8	116	12.5	114
PLAYS PER GAME	75	7		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:18	54		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	38.2%	80	40.7%	78
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	376.2	70	392.3	78
YARDS PER PLAY	5	102	5.7	81
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.9	111		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	106.2	117	143.2	50
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.4	114	4	50
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	41.8	4		
COMPLETION %	62.2%	54	63.8%	100
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	270	16	249.1	104
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.5	114	7.8	92
TURNOVERS	1.6	88	1.5	54

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

42.0
CONFERENCE: #16 of 18
NATIONAL: #68 of 136

In its first season without Taulia Tagovailoa, the program's all-time leading passer, Maryland certainly had its struggles last season, but did start 3-1 and were 4-3 after upsetting USC at home. Then, the Terps were blown out in each of their last five games and finished 4-8 overall and 1-8 in the Big Ten.

Maryland ranked 100th or lower nationally in both scoring offense and scoring defense. Those numbers led Mike Locksley to make changes at both coordinator positions. On offense, Pep Hamilton, who has been a QB whisperer for the likes of Andrew Luck, Justin Herbert, Alex Smith, Brian Griese, etc, takes over as OC. Ted Monachino has both college and NFL coordinator experience and he takes over as DC.

While not much is expected, the good news for Maryland is that they avoid the top three consensus teams in the Big Ten – Ohio State, Penn State, and Oregon.

OFFENSE
Only three starters return for this unit. UCLA transfer Justyn Martin and four-star freshman Malik Washington, who Locksley got to stay home in the DMV, will compete for the starting QB job.

Maryland has talent at receiver with Octavian Smith Jr (30-315-2) plus Jahi Farooq (Oklahoma) and Kaleb Webb (Tennessee) transfer in to replace two NFL draft choices including first team All-Big Ten Kai Felton and his 1,124 yards and nine touchdowns.

The Terps struggled to run the ball, ranking 115th nationally in yards per game (3.6 YPC). Nolan Ray (374 yards) will lead a running back by committee group.

DEFENSE
Monachino has plenty of experience developing pass rushers during his various NFL tenures in Baltimore, Indianapolis, Chicago, and Atlanta. He will need to do that here as Maryland only had 14 sacks last season. They also rated near the bottom of the conference for takeaways (17).

The group only returns one full-time starter, but last year's defense allowed 30.4 PPG and 378.1 YPG, so it has nowhere to go but upwards.

OUTLOOK
Locksley has recruited well at Maryland, and they had six players drafted this past April, the program's most since 1986. However, 20 players left the program for the transfer portal, so there is a lot of turnover in College Park.

The schedule should have three victories to start the non-conference before they travel to Wisconsin to play former Terps QB Billy Edwards Jr. Then, they have two home games after a bye week.

Maryland had made three straight bowl games before last year's poor season. It might be a bit ambitious to forecast a return to postseason play, but the schedule is heavily lightened avoiding the elite teams in the conference.

prediction

OVER 4.5 WINS

MICHIGAN
WOLVERINES

Head Coach: Sherrone Moore (2nd)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 6-7 ATS, 7-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

14 OFFENSE: 7 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 7

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	NEW MEXICO	-35.7	27.5
9/6	at Oklahoma	+0.4	58.5
9/13	C MICHIGAN	-35.2	28
9/20	at Nebraska	-5.4	53
10/4	WISCONSIN	-13.2	49.5
10/11	at USC	-2.9	55.5
10/18	WASHINGTON	-11.7	51.5
10/25	at Michigan St	-12	46.5
11/1	PURDUE	-27.6	35
11/15	vs. Northwestern	-21.1	41
11/22	at Maryland	-16.4	42
11/29	OHIO ST	+6.3	69

SOS
45.46
(#38 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.8/0.8
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+800

MAKE PLAYOFF
+200

CFP CHAMPION
25-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	22	103	19.9	17
YARDS PER POINT	13	30	15.4	31
PLAYS PER GAME	62.3	124		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:54	23		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	41.8%	47	41.4%	82
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	286.2	128	307	9
YARDS PER PLAY	4.6	124	4.7	12
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.4	47		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	157.2	70	90.7	4
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.2	73	3.1	6
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	23.7	123		
COMPLETION %	61.7%	64	60.2%	55
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	129.1	130	216.3	58
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	5.4	134	6.5	26
TURNOVERS	1.5	76	1.4	62

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

60.0 CONFERENCE: #4 of 18
NATIONAL: #13 of 136

Two years ago, Michigan won the National Championship. Last year, they paid a price for their success as Jim Harbaugh left to go back to the NFL and they lost 13 players to the NFL Draft. The result was an 8-5 campaign that included blowout home losses to Texas and Oregon, but victories at Ohio State and vs. Alabama to conclude the season.

Sherrone Moore was thrown into the fire last year but looks to have more stability in his second season as head coach with a new offense led by new OC Chip Lindsey and a defense under DC Wink Martindale that dominated the Buckeyes and the Crimson Tide.

The Wolverines will conclude the regular season as usual against Ohio State, but they avoid Penn State and Oregon and there is a high probability for a bounce back season.

OFFENSE
The Wolverines ranked 129th nationally in total offense (286.2 YPG) in 2024 and at times could barely complete a forward pass. Lindsey comes in from North Carolina as the new OC to give some life to the passing game and reunites with an old pupil Mikey Keene, who he coached at UCF. Keene transfers in from Fresno State to push the nation's No. 1 recruit Bryce Underwood for the starting QB job.

The receiving corps is largely unproven and Indiana transfer Donovan McCulley must produce immediately.

While there is a change in offensive philosophy, Michigan's identity still primarily resides with a smash-mouth running game and should still be a focus with Alabama transfer Justice Haynes running behind a deep offensive line that also returns three starters.

DEFENSE
This group was a top-10 unit last season under Martindale and has the potential to repeat that performance despite the loss of two first-round DTs (Mason Graham, Kenneth Grant). Tre Williams (Clemson) and Damon Payne (Alabama) will try to replace them while TJ Guy and Derrick Moore return at the edge positions.

Ernest Hausmann and Jaishawn Barnham, Michigan's two leading tacklers, return at LB in the 4-2-5 scheme.

Corner Will Johnson is off to the NFL, but former All Big-Ten safety Rod Moore returns from an ACL injury along with starting corners Zeke Berry and Jyaire Hill, who could be the next breakout star of this group.

OUTLOOK
Michigan's ceiling will be determined by its passing game. Underwood and/or Keene is a massive upgrade over last year's starters (Davis Warren, Alex Orji, and Jack Tuttle), so the QB play should be there which should make the questionable receiving corps more productive.

Defensively, this group has a lot of talent and good coaching under former NFL DC Martindale.

Eight of Michigan's nine Big Ten opponents this season had losing conference records last year. This should be a rebound year for the Wolverines and a CFP appearance is not out of the question.

prediction

OVER 8.5 WINS

MICHIGAN STATE
SPARTANS

Head Coach: Jonathan Smith (2nd)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 4-8 ATS, 6-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

15 OFFENSE: 9 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 6

schedule

SOS
47.67
(#22 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.3/0
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
150-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
30-1

CFP CHAMPION
400-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
--	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	17.5	126	28.5	81
YARDS PER POINT	18.5	128	12.3	117
PLAYS PER GAME	64.9	107		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:36	46		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	35.7%	103	44.6%	106
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	323.4	115	349.5	39
YARDS PER PLAY	5	105	5.4	57
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.4	104		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	110	114	135	37
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.4	116	3.9	46
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	29.5	75		
COMPLETION %	59.3%	87	61.2%	68
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	213.4	81	214.5	54
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.2	69	7.3	68
TURNOVERS	1.6	88	0.9	115

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

46.5 CONFERENCE: #15 of 18
NATIONAL: #55 of 136

Jonathan Smith gradually re-built a program at his alma mater Oregon State and that's the plan he is taking at Michigan State.

The Spartans started his first season in East Lansing at 4-3, but lost four of its last five games to miss out on bowl eligibility for the third straight season.

Sparty opens with three non-conference games at home, but has a difficult Big Ten road schedule with trips to USC, Nebraska, Indiana, Minnesota, and Iowa.

OFFENSE
QB Aidan Chiles came with Smith from Oregon State and had an up-and-down season. In his first five games, he completed just 56 percent of his passes with a 5-8 TD-INT ratio. Those numbers improved in the final seven games to 61 percent with an 8-3 TD-INT ratio. He had to do too much last year and a reunion with Jon Boyer, his QB coach at Oregon State, could be what helps him take a leap this season.

WR Nick Marsh (41-649-3) and TE Jack Velling (36-411-1) return, but transfers Omari Kelly (first team All-CUSA at Middle Tennessee) and RB Elijah Tau-Tolliver (950 rushing yards; 38 receptions at FCS Sacramento State) will be called upon immediately.

The offensive line was the weakest link on the team last year as the Spartans ranked just 110th nationally in rushing offense. Three veteran transfers including C Matt Gulbin, a 22-game starter at Wake Forest, arrive to start for this group.

DEFENSE
The Spartans were stout against the run (32nd nationally), but could not get to opposing passers and only tallied 19 total sacks last season. Jalen Thompson has made 16 straight starts at the end position, but the defensive line talent and depth are still major question marks for this group.

Depth at linebacker and in the secondary is more stable with Jordan Hall manning the middle at LB and third-year starter Malik Spencer at SS.

OUTLOOK
Despite the inconsistent play last season, Michigan State was not all that far off from reaching a bowl game in Smith's first season. Save for the Michigan and Penn State games, the Spartans will be favored to win their other five home games.

The question is whether they can steal a game somewhere on the road in conference play? That all rests on the shoulders of Chiles, who took his lumps last season, but should be improved this season. Nevertheless, the talent around him and throughout this roster is not there just yet.

prediction
UNDER 5.5 WINS

MINNESOTA
GOLDEN GOPHERS

Head Coach: P. J. Fleck (9th)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 10-2-1 ATS, 5-7-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

12 OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 6

SOS
42.88
(#61 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
100-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
14-1

CFP CHAMPION
400-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	24.3	86	18.3	10
YARDS PER POINT	13.6	51	16.3	17
PLAYS PER GAME	64	114		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:14	32		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	44.0%	27	39.5%	68
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	330.8	108	298.3	6
YARDS PER PLAY	5.2	93	4.7	14
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.4	113		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	115.6	108	117.3	21
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.8	91	3.6	20
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	31.5	56		
COMPLETION %	65.1%	27	60.4%	60
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	215.3	77	181	11
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.8	92	6.3	19
TURNOVERS	1	24	1.4	58

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

49.5 CONFERENCE: #12 of 18
NATIONAL: #40 of 136

After a losing season in 2023, Minnesota rebounded to go 8-5 with another bowl game victory to move PJ Fleck's bowl record to 6-0 in Minneapolis. Last year's campaign included upsets of USC and Wisconsin.

Last year, the Gophers had five Big Ten road games, but this year they have five conference games at home.

Minnesota, like many teams, has a major roster turnover including looking for a replacement for QB Max Brosmer, who is still in Minnesota but now wearing a Vikings uniform instead of a Gophers one.

OFFENSE
Redshirt freshman Drake Lindsey looks to be the starter that will replace Brosmer. It is reasonable to expect the Gophers to be even more run-heavy this season with a young quarterback. Darius Taylor ran for 986 yards and 10 touchdowns last season, plus had 54 catches for 350 yards and two touchdowns.

The OL must be rebuilt a bit after losing three starters including standout Phillip Daniels, who transfers to Ohio State.

It is not just the offensive line that needs restructuring but the receiving corps as well, as Daniel Jackson and Elijah Spencer accounted for over half of the Gophers passing production but have now graduated. Miami (OH) transfer Javon Tracy (57-818-7) could end up being the main target for a young, inexperienced QB.

DEFENSE
DC Corey Hetherman helped lead this group to a No. 5 national ranking in total defense and now moves on to take the same defensive coordinator position at Miami (FL), so Danny Collins is promoted from safeties coach to the position.

First-team All-Big Ten safety Koi Perich (5 INT) leads a secondary that loses its top two corners, including third-rounder Justin Walley, and nickelback.

Leading tackler Cody Lindenberg is off to the NFL, but his backups at linebacker are experienced as are veterans Anthony Smith and Deven Eastern on the line.

OUTLOOK
Fleck has built a consistently solid program at Minnesota. He has also consistently wanted to get out of Minnesota and move to a bigger job.

The defense will take a step back but should still be solid, but the offense looks like it will really struggle to move the ball through the air.

While the schedule is more manageable with five home games in conference play, road wins will be tough to find having to take trips to Ohio State, Oregon, and Iowa. The 6.5 total looks to be right in the market.

prediction

UNDER 6.5 WINS

NEBRASKA
CORNHUSKERS
Head Coach: Matt Rhule (3rd)
2024 Record: 7-6 SU & 6-4-3 ATS, 4-9 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS
15 OFFENSE: 10 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 5

SOS
44.30
(#51 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.4/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
40-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+900

CFP CHAMPION
150-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	22.7	98	20.8	20
YARDS PER POINT	15.6	95	15.3	34
PLAYS PER GAME	71.4	36		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:58	6		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	41.8%	48	35.0%	30
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	353.1	93	319.5	14
YARDS PER PLAY	4.9	106	5.3	53
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.1	82		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	129.8	92	98.3	7
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.7	99	3.4	17
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.1	35		
COMPLETION %	65.5%	25	65.1%	107
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	223.3	63	221.3	64
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.6	109	7.7	84
TURNOVERS	1.5	70	1.3	71

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
53.0 CONFERENCE: #9 of 18
NATIONAL: #31 of 136

Much has been expected of Nebraska with the hire of Matt Rhule three years ago. While there is a process to get the Cornhuskers even close to past glory, 12-13 over the last two seasons is not good enough for the Nebraska faithful.

Last year, after a three-game losing streak, Rhule demoted OC Marcus Satterfield and installed former West Virginia and Houston head coach Dana Holgorsen in the role. QB Dylan Raiola was given shorter and quicker passes and played his best ball of the season over the final four games and Nebraska finished with a winning season for the first time in nine years.

Rhule got his Temple and Baylor teams into their respective conference championship games in their third years. How much of a leap can Nebraska take in his third year in Lincoln?

OFFENSE
Raiola had an up-and-down freshman season, throwing for 2,819 yards and a 13-11 TD-INT ratio on 67 percent completions. After Holgorsen took over the play calling, Raiola bumped up his completion percentage to 72 percent and threw just one pick over his final four games.

While he will run a bit more this season, Raiola will rely heavily on RB Emmett Johnson, who tallied almost 900 combined rushing and receiving yards and was used more heavily with Holgorsen calling plays. Dane Key (Kentucky) and Nyziah Hunter (Cal) were also added out of the portal to go along with returning leading receiver Jacory Barney Jr 55-447).

The offensive line gets an infusion of talent with Rocco Spindler (Notre Dame) and Elijah Pritchett (Alabama) and should be a better unit for a better offense (94th nationally) than last year's group.

DEFENSE
Tony White left to take the DC job at Florida State, so safeties coach John Butler was promoted to the gig. Butler wants to attack more but has an entirely new starting defensive line to try and accomplish that task.

Four starters return, all in the secondary, led by DeShon Singleton (71 tackles). Dasan McCullough (Oklahoma) comes in to help off the edge. LB Marques Watson-Trent was the Sun Belt Defensive POY last year at Georgia Southern.

This was a top-20 group each of the last two years and should be around that level although there may be some growing pains early, especially up front.

OUTLOOK
Nebraska crossed a hurdle last year with a winning season culminating with a Pinstripe Bowl victory over Boston College.

Rhule went 10-4 in his third season at Temple and 11-3 in his third season at Baylor. A double-digit win season this year in Lincoln might be a bit ambitious, but this should be the best team in Rhule's tenure.

They avoid Ohio State and Oregon and have five home games with three of the four conference road games that are winnable (Maryland, Minnesota, UCLA). The Huskers will not need to backdoor into bowl eligibility this year.

prediction
OVER 7.5 WINS

NORTHWESTERN
WILDCATS

Head Coach: David Braun (3rd)
2024 Record: 4-8 SU & 4-8 ATS, 7-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

14 OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	at Tulane	+7.7	45.5
9/5	W ILLINOIS	-39.2	4.5
9/13	OREGON	+21.3	64
9/27	UCLA	+3.7	46.5
10/4	LA MONROE	-15.1	28.5
10/11	at Penn St	+30	68
10/18	PURDUE	-8	35
10/25	at Nebraska	+14.7	53
11/7	at USC	+17.2	55.5
11/15	vs. Michigan	+17.6	60
11/22	vs. Minnesota	+6.4	49.5
11/29	at Illinois	+16.5	54.5

SOS
47.07
(#26 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.2/-0.3
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
300-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
80-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	16.6	129	28.1	79
YARDS PER POINT	16.2	105	13.4	93
PLAYS PER GAME	63.8	115		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:18	87		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	32.7%	123	41.1%	80
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	269.4	131	375.7	64
YARDS PER PLAY	4.2	130	5.5	67
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	29.1	122		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	89	129	138.1	41
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.1	129	4.1	53
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.6	46		
COMPLETION %	52.7%	127	63.3%	92
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	180.4	110	237.6	89
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	5.5	133	7.3	63
TURNOVERS	1.6	88	1.4	66

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

41.0 CONFERENCE: #17 of 18
NATIONAL: #72 of 136

After the Wildcats shocked many in college football by going 8-5 under then interim coach David Braun, who took over late in the summer of 2023 after Pat Fitzgerald's termination, it was back to reality for Northwestern with a 4-8 season.

There were seven double-digit losses as the Wildcats were anemic offensively (128th in Scoring – 17.8 PPG; 122nd in Rushing – 98.5 YPG, and 130th in Total Offense).

The two conference wins were against Maryland and Purdue, who were a combined 1-17 in Big Ten play. The schedule has five conference home games, but it has road trips to Penn State, Nebraska, USC, and Illinois, so it does not get much easier this season.

OFFENSE
This unit cannot really get any worse than last year's group. An upgrade at QB is a good place to start as the strong-armed Preston Stone transfers in from SMU. He put up big numbers (3,197 yards, 28 TD passes in 2023), but ended up losing his job early last season.

Receiver is certainly a question mark. South Dakota State transfer Griffin Wilde (70-1,147-12) reunites with his former OC Zach Lujan, but it is a bit of a bare cupboard behind him.

The offensive line finally seems to have some talent and depth to block for 1-2 punch Cam Porter and Joe Himon.

DEFENSE
Northwestern's group up front is arguably the team's strongest unit with sack leader Aidan Hubbard (6), starting tackles Najee Story and Carmine Bastone and end Anto Saka returning.

Leading tackler Mac Uihlein (85 tackles) and Braydon Brus are back at linebacker and joined by Purdue transfer Yanni Karlaftis.

The secondary has some talent with CB Josh Fussell and S Robert Fitzgerald returning to go along with Jacksonville State transfer corner Fred Davis Jr. and S Damon Walters having the highest ceiling of the entire group.

OUTLOOK
Expectations are obviously low in Evanston and the Wildcats are certainly behind the curve in terms of NIL but will not be in facilities as a new stadium will open next season. Meanwhile, the 'Cats are playing at 12,000-seat Martin Stadium off Lake Michigan and have two November games at Wrigley Field.

With Stone at QB, this team at least has a glimmer of hope to move the football through the air that it did not have last season, and they should be able to run the ball more effectively with a more experienced OL.

The Wildcats have a tough non-conference game at Tulane and the road schedule is brutal in conference play. However, there are a few winnable games at home and this team should be slightly improved from last year.

prediction

OVER 3.5 WINS

OHIO STATE
BUCKEYES

Head Coach: Ryan Day (7th)
2024 Record: 14-2 SU & 10-6 ATS, 8-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

9 OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 3

SOS
46.80
(#28 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3.1/0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+190

MAKE PLAYOFF
-400

CFP CHAMPION
+500

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	35.7	9	12.9	1
YARDS PER POINT	12	9	19.8	3
PLAYS PER GAME	62.8	123		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:18	55		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	43.6%	29	34.9%	28
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	429.4	24	254.9	1
YARDS PER PLAY	6.8	4	4	1
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	33.3	95		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	166.4	52	87.9	3
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5	25	2.7	2
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.4	89		
COMPLETION %	71.4%	7	60.4%	61
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	263	28	167	2
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	9.2	5	6	10
TURNOVERS	0.9	19	1.2	93

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
69.0 CONFERENCE: #1 of 18
NATIONAL: #2 of 136

Perhaps Ryan Day assuaged some of the concerns of the Buckeyes faithful after winning the National Championship last season. Nevertheless, the expectations for this program do not change as the fanbase expects to compete for said National Championship every year. They also do not expect to lose to Michigan four straight years.

Only eight of 22 starters are back, and 14 players were drafted into the NFL this past April, including eight on defense alone. The attrition is not only on the player roster, but on the coaching staff as well as both coordinators depart (Chip Kelly to the Raiders; Jim Knowles to Penn State). In their places are Brian Hartline on offense and former NFL head coach Matt Patricia on defense.

The two toughest games of the season are at the "Big Horseshoe" as Texas and Penn State come to town. Both of those teams are top four in the odds to win the National Championship, but the No. 1 team on the odds board? You guessed it, Ohio State.

OFFENSE

Ohio State has lived up to its moniker of "Wide Receiver U" having a player drafted in the first round at the position in each of the last four years. Jeremiah Smith (76-1,315-15) may end up being the best of the bunch. This year he will not have Emeka Egbuka, one of those first-rounders, on the other side (although the talent at the position is off the charts) and has a new QB in sophomore Julian Sayin.

Purdue transfer Max Klare was one of the more productive tight ends (51-685-4) in the nation even in an anemic offense. Carnell Tate (52-733-4) replaces Egbuka at the other receiver position.

James Peeples and West Virginia transfer CJ Donaldson (2058 yards and 30 touchdowns in three years) will be the 1-2 punch in the backfield running behind three returning starters on the OL.

DEFENSE

The offense has its fair share of turnover, but last year's No. 1 defense in the nation has even more. However, Patricia has a defensive star to build around in All-American free safety Caleb Downs to go along with outstanding corner duo Davison Igbinosun and Jermaine Matthews Jr.

The starting linebackers, Sonny Styles and Arvell Reese, are also high-level talents.

It is the defensive line that is the main question mark as all four starters depart. There is talent there, including North Carolina transfer Beau Atkinson, but not a great deal of depth.

OUTLOOK

Talent is never a question at Ohio State, but Day is counting on a new QB and a re-tooled defensive front. The Buckeyes have replaced talent before, but replacing Kelly and Knowles is a very tall task.

The schedule is no easy slate either as the Buckeyes have two teams seeking big revenge opening with Texas, who was driving for the tie late in the CFP Semifinal before Jack Sawyer's strip sack and score sealed it, and Penn State, who may have their best roster under James Franklin.

prediction
UNDER 10.5 WINS

OREGON
DUCKS

Head Coach: Dan Lanning (4th)
2024 Record: 13-1 SU & 7-7 ATS, 7-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

14 OFFENSE: 8
DEFENSE: 6

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	MONTANA ST	-19.4	47.5
9/6	OKLAHOMA ST	-25.2	41.5
9/13	at Northwestern	-21.3	41
9/20	OREGON ST	-27.9	39.5
9/27	at Penn St	+6.2	68
10/11	INDIANA	-11.9	55
10/18	at Rutgers	-14.3	48
10/25	WISCONSIN	-17.3	49.5
11/8	at Iowa	-8.7	53
11/14	MINNESOTA	-17.3	49.5
11/22	USC	-11.8	55.5
11/29	at Washington	-10.2	51.5

SOS
49.08
(#15 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.9/0.5
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+320

MAKE PLAYOFF
-270

CFP CHAMPION
11-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	35.7	8	19.8	16
YARDS PER POINT	12.2	10	16.3	15
PLAYS PER GAME	68.4	72		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:11	61		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	48.8%	5	33.9%	23
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	433.7	20	323.7	18
YARDS PER PLAY	6.3	16	5	26
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.5	76		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	161.9	62	136.4	39
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.6	46	4.2	60
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	31.5	55		
COMPLETION %	71.7%	5	56.7%	12
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	271.8	15	187.3	20
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.6	10	6.2	13
TURNOVERS	0.8	12	1.2	100

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
64.0 CONFERENCE: #3 of 18
NATIONAL: #7 of 136

Oregon was the only team in FBS college football last season to go unbeaten in the regular season. That 13-0 mark included victories over Ohio State and over Penn State in the Big Ten Championship Game. However, that all ended with a thud in the CFP Quarterfinals as Ohio State went duck hunting in a dominant performance at the Rose Bowl.

The Ducks had 10 players drafted last April and a lot of production leaves the program, as only five total starters (2 offense, 3 defense) return. Nevertheless, Oregon has plenty of talent and Dan Lanning has added yet another top-five recruiting class.

A rematch with Penn State in Happy Valley looms at the end of September, but the Ducks will be favored in every other game this season.

OFFENSE
QB Dante Moore, a former five-star recruit who started five games for UCLA in 2023, has had a year in the system behind the departed Dillon Gabriel.

Moore will have some help with Tulane transfer Makhi Hughes (1,401 yards, 15 TD), the top running back out of the portal, and Noah Whittington (1,465 rushing yards, 56 catches). TE Kenyon Sadiq is a potential star to go along with WR Evan Stewart (48-613-5) and Dakorien Moore, the top freshman receiver recruit in the nation.

The OL will remain the key though as just one starter – Rimington Award candidate C Iapani Laloiulu – anchors a transfer-heavy group.

DEFENSE
LB Bryce Boettcher led the team in tackles (94) and edge Matayo Ulagalelei led in sacks (9.5). Both are back, along with edge Teitum Tuioti (5.5 sacks) and speedy LB Devon Jackson (10.54 100m).

This is a unit, though, that will rely heavily on newcomers like DT Bear Alexander (USC) and LB Jadon Canady (Ole Miss).

The prize transfers on defense though may be in the secondary as FS Dillon Thieneman, the Big Ten Freshman of the Year at Purdue in 2023, and CB Theran Johnson, second-team All-Big Ten at Northwestern last year, come in to complement a great deal of young talent in this group.

OUTLOOK
Lanning is 35-6 in three years at Oregon and the former Georgia defensive coordinator recruits at an SEC-type level here. The Rose Bowl vs. Ohio State was really the first loss of his career in Eugene where his team got outplayed and his staff got out-schemed.

Despite the poor finish in that game, Oregon won the Big Ten as first-year members, and they are certainly motivated to atone for that season-ending defeat.

The talent is certainly still here, but a lot of it is young talent. Oregon is certainly a College Football Playoff contender once again, but the inexperience will be a lot to overcome.

prediction

UNDER 10.5 WINS

PENN STATE
NITTANY LIONS

Head Coach: James Franklin (12th)
2024 Record: 13-3 SU & 8-8 ATS, 7-9 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

15 OFFENSE: 9 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 6

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	NEVADA	-43.6	27
9/6	FLA INTERNATIONAL	-45.3	26
9/13	VILLANOVA	-46.2	24.5
9/27	OREGON	-6.2	64
10/4	at UCLA	-19.9	46.5
10/11	NORTHWESTERN	-30	41
10/18	at Iowa	-12.9	53
11/1	at Ohio St	+3.4	69
11/8	INDIANA	-15.7	55
11/15	at Michigan St	-19.9	46.5
11/22	NEBRASKA	-17.8	53
11/29	at Rutgers	-18.5	48

SOS
45.28
(#41 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/0.7
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+240

MAKE PLAYOFF
-350

CFP CHAMPION
+750

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	33.1	22	16.5	6
YARDS PER POINT	13	29	17.9	7
PLAYS PER GAME	67	82		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:22	53		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	45.9%	16	36.8%	42
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	430.2	23	295.1	5
YARDS PER PLAY	6.4	10	4.5	7
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38.4	35		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	202.3	15	102.2	8
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.3	18	3.1	7
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	27.3	101		
COMPLETION %	66.8%	18	60.1%	51
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	227.9	59	192.9	28
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.3	18	6.5	30
TURNOVERS	0.9	22	1.6	39

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

68.0 CONFERENCE: #2 of 18
NATIONAL: #4 of 136

Penn State won two games – SMU and Boise State - in the College Football Playoff last year before bowing out on a late field goal to Notre Dame in the Semifinals at the Orange Bowl. Any win in the Playoff is big, but the question of whether James Franklin can really win "the big one" still lingers.

Franklin is a frequent changer of coordinators, perhaps to pass some of the heat off himself. This year, he has another new defensive coordinator, the third in three seasons, as Tom Allen leaves for Clemson. Enter Jim Knowles fresh off winning the National Championship and having the nation's best defense at Ohio State last year.

Before Penn State can win "the big one", as in a National Championship, the Nittany Lions must prove they can beat the elite (Ohio State, Oregon) in conference and they will face both this season.

OFFENSE
QB Drew Allar threw for 3327 yards and 24 TDs and had a 73.7% completion rate in the regular season. However, he struggled in the big games particularly against Ohio State and Notre Dame. Some of that is on Allar, but some also must fall upon a receiving corps in which the top six only caught 102 passes while now departed TE Tyler Warren caught 104 by himself.

The receiver position has been made over with transfers, including Kyron Hudson (USC), Trebor Pena (Syracuse), and Devonte Ross (Troy), who had a combined 198 catches, 2,498 yards, and 23 touchdowns.

Regardless, the Penn State offense is carried by arguably the best running back duo in college football with Nicholas Singleton (1,099 yards, 12 TD) and Kaytron Allen (1,108 yards, 8 TD). This pair will run behind Penn State's best OL in years that returns four starters.

DEFENSE
The Nittany Lions lost four draft picks from their top-10 defense last season, but the cupboard is not bare, as six starters return for new coordinator Knowles and the group has the potential to be even better despite losing Big Ten Defensive POY and No. 3 overall draft choice Abdul Carter.

Penn State is stacked at defensive end with Dani Dennis-Sutton (8.5 sacks), Zuriah Fisher, and Max Granville. Zane Durant is a high-level run stopper. Tony Rojas and Dominic Deluca also return at linebacker.

Safety Zakee Wheatley and corner AJ Harris could be the next draft choices from the Penn State defense.

OUTLOOK
This is arguably the best roster that Franklin has had in State College. It is a senior-laden group that is experienced, so the Nittany Lions are "all-in" for the National Championship this season.

Nevertheless, Franklin has been a bit gun-shy in the biggest of games and it has cost his team in the past like the Ohio State game last year.

It could be Penn State's best chance at a national title since they last won one in 1986. If the Nittany Lions cannot reach the peak this year, then when will it happen?

prediction

OVER 10.5 WINS

PURDUE
BOILERMAKERS

Head Coach: Barry Odom (1st)
2024 Record: 1-11 SU & 3-9 ATS, 7-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

8
OFFENSE: 3
DEFENSE: 5

SOS
49.19
(#13 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2/0.2
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
500-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
200-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	12.7	134	43.5	132
YARDS PER POINT	21.5	134	11	133
PLAYS PER GAME	58.2	133		
TIME OF POSSESSION	26:36	129		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	28.2%	130	51.9%	133
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	273.5	130	478.9	129
YARDS PER PLAY	4.7	119	6.9	130
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.7	125		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	103.3	119	209	120
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.6	108	5.4	122
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	26.7	106		
COMPLETION %	54.1%	120	66.3%	115
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	170.2	118	269.9	122
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.4	117	9.3	133
TURNOVERS	1.6	88	0.5	132

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preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

35.0
CONFERENCE: #18 of 18
NATIONAL: #96 of 136

After suffering a 66-0 defeat, the worst in rivalry history, in the Old Oaken Bucket game at Indiana, Ryan Walters was shown the door after a combined 5-19 record in the last two seasons. Barry Odom comes in from two seasons of winning a combined 19 games at UNLV. While he just constructed a rebuild in Vegas, he has his work cut out for him here, as he must not only improve recruiting, but also build the lacking NIL structure in a major way.

It also does not help matters that archrival Indiana has seemingly never been in a stronger position as a program and the fix will not be near as quick in West Lafayette.

Purdue lost 35 players to the transfer portal and essentially has a brand-new team. They also have three playoff teams – Notre Dame, Ohio State, and Indiana – on the schedule.

OFFENSE
QB Ryan Browne started two games for Purdue last year and then transferred to North Carolina in December before having a change of heart and returning to Purdue. He will battle Arkansas transfer Malachi Singleton.

Perhaps the only strength of this team is at running back as Devin Mockobee needs 1,170 yards to pass Mike Alstott as the school's all-time rushing leader. Malachi Thomas (Virginia Tech) provides good depth. However, both will be running behind a completely rebuilt offensive line.

Eight receivers arrive from the portal, including Nitro Tuggle (Georgia), Charles Ross (USC), and Chauncey Maygood (UCF).

DEFENSE
Zero starters return from a group that gave up just under 40 PPG to rank 130th nationally. That is probably a good thing, but Dillon Thienemann (Oregon) is a huge loss. Six portal DBs come into the secondary including corner Tony Grimes (UNLV) and safety Crew Wakley (BYU).

Sanders Ellis (FCS Tennessee State) mans the middle and looks to be the best of the bunch at linebacker.

CJ Madden is the holdover on the defensive line but was lost after three games due to an ankle injury last year. CJ Nunnally IV (Akron) and Breeon Ishmail (Michigan) will be the edge rushers. TJ Lindsey (Auburn) and Marcus Moore (Bowling Green) will anchor the interior.

OUTLOOK
Purdue could get off to a solid start with home games vs. Ball State and FCS Southern Illinois, but nothing is a gimme when you begin a new season having lost 11 games in a row even with a mostly new roster.

Then, it gets harder as they are likely to be underdogs in every conference game. They get five home games, but only one (Rutgers) is winnable as the rest of the slate is USC, Illinois, Ohio State, and Indiana.

Odom was a good hire, but this is a multi-year rebuilding process even with the transfer portal carousel constantly turning.

prediction

UNDER 3.5 WINS

RUTGERS
SCARLET KNIGHTS

Head Coach: Greg Schiano (6th)
2024 Record: 7-6 SU & 7-5-1 ATS, 9-4 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

16 OFFENSE: 9 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 7

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	OHIO U	-12.1	38
9/6	MIAMI OHIO	-14.6	35.5
9/13	NORFOLK ST	-46.8	3
9/19	IOWA	+3.1	53
9/27	at Minnesota	+4.3	49.5
10/10	at Washington	+6.5	51.5
10/18	OREGON	+14.3	64
10/25	at Purdue	-10.8	35
11/1	at Illinois	+9.4	54.5
11/8	MARYLAND	-8.4	42
11/22	at Ohio St	+24.3	69
11/29	PENN ST	+18.5	68

SOS
46.98
(#27 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.2/-0.2
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
250-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
25-1

CFP CHAMPION
800-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	27.7	58	26.9	72
YARDS PER POINT	13.6	48	15.1	43
PLAYS PER GAME	71.8	33		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:37	26		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	43.0%	34	43.7%	98
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	374.9	71	405.3	91
YARDS PER PLAY	5.2	91	6.1	105
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	39.3	28		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	162.5	60	164.6	85
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.1	74	5.4	120
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.9	62		
COMPLETION %	53.4%	121	60.2%	53
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	212.4	83	240.7	95
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.9	89	7.2	59
TURNOVERS	0.8	8	1	108

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

48.0 CONFERENCE: #13 of 18
NATIONAL: #45 of 136

Building the Rutgers program was easier for Greg Schiano in the 2000s when the Scarlet Knights were members of the Big East. It has not been as easy in the Big Ten as Rutgers is just 11-33 in conference games since Schiano returned to New Jersey.

However, the Scarlet Knights have been to consecutive bowl games for the first time since 2014.

The program culture is there, but the NIL provides a struggle for Rutgers to keep some higher-end talent and to provide good enough offers for incoming talent.

OFFENSE
This group put together its best offensive numbers in the last decade for the program. Athan Kaliakmanis became the first Rutgers QB to throw for over 2,000 yards (2,696 yards, 18 TD) since 2015.

While Kyle Monangai is off to the NFL, Antwan Raymond (457 yards, 8 TD) proved to be a capable backup last year at running back and will combine with FAU transfer CJ Campbell (844 yards, 11 TD). They will run behind a line that returns four starters.

The receiving corps returns some production with Ian Strong (43-676-5) and KJ Duff (27-425-1). Also, DT Sheffield transferred in from North Texas and TE Kenny Fletcher, who had 20 catches in six games before injuries shut him down for the season, returns.

DEFENSE
Robb Smith is back for his third stint as DC for the Scarlet Knights. He will need to replace seven of his top 10 tacklers.

Linebacker Daniel Djaborne led the team with 105 tackles, but Rutgers needs a better pass rush up front, so they bring in James Madison transfer Eric O'Neill (13 sacks) and Ohio transfer Bradley Weaver (8.5 sacks), plus Doug Blue-Eli (South Florida) to plug the middle.

Cam Miller (Penn State) and Jacobie Henderson (Marshall) come in to play corner along with returner Bo Mascoe. UNLV transfer Jett Elad joins returning starter Kaj Sanders at safety.

OUTLOOK
While Rutgers' Big Ten record has been poor, they did win four conference games for the first time last year since joining the league.

They could be a better team than last year, but with a worse record, as the Scarlet Knights must play all the top three projected teams in the conference, hosting Oregon and then travelling to Ohio State and hosting Penn State for the final two games of the season.

The first four games are at home including three against Group of 5 or FCS opponents and then an important swing game with Iowa. The schedule is a nightmare, but the culture may be strong enough to steal a victory.

prediction

OVER 5.5 WINS

UCLA
BRUINS

Head Coach: DeShaun Foster (2nd)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 6-6 ATS, 4-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

10
OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 6

SOS
50.31
(#9 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.3/0.4
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
200-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
25-1

CFP CHAMPION
400-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	18.4	123	25.3	59
YARDS PER POINT	17.9	126	13.5	90
PLAYS PER GAME	64.1	113		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:07	34		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	42.7%	37	48.1%	123
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	329	110	340.8	34
YARDS PER PLAY	5.1	96	5.3	51
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.1	128		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	86.8	131	96.2	6
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.1	126	3.3	15
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	33.2	38		
COMPLETION %	65.1%	28	65.5%	108
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	242.3	44	244.7	98
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.3	64	7.1	56
TURNOVERS	1.4	63	1.1	105

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

46.5
CONFERENCE: #14 of 18
NATIONAL: #53 of 136

Former Bruin great DeShaun Foster was put behind the eight-ball getting hired in February when Chip Kelly departed to become the offensive coordinator at Ohio State. His introduction to UCLA's new conference at Big Ten Media Day was perhaps an ominous sign as the Bruins got off to a 1-5 start. Then, they had a three-game winning streak before finishing 5-7.

Thirty-eight players transferred and the coaching staff received a massive makeover. Tino Sunseri arrives from Indiana to be the OC to help turn around an anemic offense (18.4 PPG).

Perhaps these changes end up working, but the schedule is not an easy slate by any means.

OFFENSE
QB Nico Iamaleava had a highly publicized falling out with Tennessee over NIL money and came back to the L.A. area to try and make UCLA Football relevant again in the City of Angels. He will have a mostly new receiving corps with transfers Mikey Matthews (Cal) and Jaedon Wilson (Arkansas) joining holdovers Kwazi Gilmer (31-345-2) and Titus Mokiao-Atimalala (28-294-1).

Only two starters return up front, so the Bruins had to hit the portal and picked up Courtland Ford (Kentucky), Julian Armella (Florida State), and Eugene Brooks (Oregon).

UCLA could not run the ball at all, ranking 132nd in rushing last season. Jaivian Thomas arrives from Cal to go along with the well-traveled Jalen Berger.

DEFENSE
Only one starter, DT Siale Taupaki, returns for a defense that ranked sixth nationally against the run.

All-American LB Carson Schwesinger is off to the NFL, but Isaiah Chisom arrives from Oregon State to man the linebacker group with Jalen Woods and JonJon Vaughns.

The secondary is essentially all new with Bryon Threats (UCF), Key Lawrence (Ole Miss), Ben Perry (Louisville), Andre Jordan Jr (Oregon State), and Robert Stafford (Miami FL).

OUTLOOK
The offense gets an upgrade at QB with Iamaleava and at OC with Sunseri, who was the QB coach and co-OC for an Indiana offense that averaged 41.3 PPG (second nationally).

However, the talent is still not there offensively to put UCLA in the upper half of the Big Ten and the defense is essentially all from the portal.

It is premature to say that Foster cannot get it done in Westwood, but he is young and inexperienced as a head coach and there are more ways for this to fall apart than to keep it together. Plus, the schedule has very few spots where you can circle victories.

prediction

UNDER 5.5 WINS

USC
TROJANS

Head Coach: Lincoln Riley (4th)
2024 Record: 7-6 SU & 8-5 ATS, 7-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

16
OFFENSE: 9 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 7

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	MISSOURI ST	-34.2	23.5
9/6	GA SOUTHERN	-20.8	37.5
9/13	at Purdue	-18.1	35
9/20	MICHIGAN ST	-11.4	46.5
9/27	at Illinois	+2.1	54.5
10/11	MICHIGAN	+2.9	60
10/18	at Notre Dame	+13.5	65.5
11/1	at Nebraska	+0.3	53
11/7	NORTHWESTERN	-17.2	41
11/15	IOWA	-4.6	53
11/22	at Oregon	+11.8	64
11/29	UCLA	-11	46.5

SOS
48.28
(#19 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.4/-0.4
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
22-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+500

CFP CHAMPION
100-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	30.2	40	24.1	46
YARDS PER POINT	14.5	72	15.7	27
PLAYS PER GAME	70.2	53		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:22	52		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	44.9%	23	33.5%	18
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	437.5	18	377.1	65
YARDS PER PLAY	6.2	18	5.7	78
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28	129		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	145.6	79	141.5	46
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.2	21	4.5	79
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	41.1	7		
COMPLETION %	62.7%	46	67.7%	124
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	291.9	9	235.5	86
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.1	78	7	49
TURNOVERS	1.6	86	1.4	62

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

55.5 CONFERENCE: #5 of 18
NATIONAL: #20 of 136

The Men of Troy have been trying to recapture the magic of the Pete Carroll years for two decades now. Lincoln Riley has not done it yet in his fourth season.

Although it was a transition in the first season as members of the Big Ten, USC has fallen below expectations for a while now. Those 7-6 seasons do not cut it here.

USC avoids Ohio State and Penn State, but does travel to Notre Dame and Oregon. With the more difficult schedule in the Big Ten, you are seeing USC do what they never did, which is to play non-power programs and directional schools in the non-conference. Wins have certainly been more difficult to come by lately.

OFFENSE
When you have coached three Heisman Trophy quarterbacks (Baker Mayfield, Kyler Murray, Caleb Williams), you get the reputation as the QB whisperer. Is Jayden Maiava listening? He took over the reins as the starter with four games left in the season and went 3-1 and is the clear starter this season.

While transfers hit the receiving group hard, the Trojans return their top two pass catchers – Makai Lemon (52-764-3) and Ja'Kobi Lane (43-525-12).

Woody Marks and his 1,133 yards departed from the backfield, but Eli Sanders was a 1,000-yard rusher at New Mexico last year, while Waymond Jordan was the national JUCO POY last year and Bryan Jackson led them to the Las Vegas Bowl win.

DEFENSE
USC always has "dudes" from a skill position standpoint, but they have not had them in recent years at the line of scrimmage on either the offensive or defensive lines. A veteran core including Devan Thompkins, Anthony Lucas, and Braylan Shelby returns along with North Carolina transfer Keeshawn Silver.

Eric Gentry returns at linebacker after taking a redshirt year due to concussions. He is needed to help with a pass rush that only garnered 21 sacks.

Kamari Ramsey is steady at free safety, but the secondary has some question marks. DJ Harvey (San Jose State) and Bishop Fitzgerald (NC State) aim to improve a group that allowed opponents to complete 68 percent of their passes last season.

OUTLOOK
Aside from Maiava's continued development, the main keys to this season for the Trojans are getting back to what they used to be on both sides of the line of scrimmage and finding ways to win close games. USC lost five games last season by a combined 19 points.

The Trojans also went 1-4 on the road in 2024 and have trips to Oregon, Notre Dame, Illinois, and Nebraska on this slate. They will be favored in every home game but stealing at least one on the road, while not getting them in Big Ten Championship contention, will get them back into the Top 25.

The line of 7.5 wins calls for a slight improvement and that seems to be what is in the store this year for USC.

prediction

OVER 7.5 WINS

WASHINGTON
HUSKIES

Head Coach: Jedd Fisch (2nd)
2024 Record: 6-7 SU & 5-8 ATS, 5-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

12 OFFENSE: 5
DEFENSE: 7

SOS
47.53
(#23 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.8/-0.4
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
60-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+900

CFP CHAMPION
250-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	22.4	99	25.5	61
YARDS PER POINT	17.1	123	13.1	99
PLAYS PER GAME	67.4	79		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:15	58		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	35.6%	104	45.7%	113
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	384.2	59	334.8	27
YARDS PER PLAY	5.7	54	5.1	40
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.3	106		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	123.8	99	162.6	83
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.8	88	4.6	83
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.1	51		
COMPLETION %	72.5%	3	57.7%	24
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	260.3	31	172.3	6
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.1	27	6	8
TURNOVERS	1	24	1.2	96

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

51.5 CONFERENCE: #10 of 18
NATIONAL: #36 of 136

Other than Oregon running the table during its inaugural season, there were plenty of ups and downs for the other Pac-12 expatriates and Washington was certainly no exception. The Huskies went 6-7 in Jedd Fisch's first season in Seattle. The portal losses after a National Championship appearance and Kalen DeBoer's departure to Alabama were too much to overcome.

Washington has new coordinators on both sides of the ball as Jimmie Dougherty was promoted from within at OC and former Purdue HC Ryan Walters takes over as DC.

The Huskies are ahead of the schedule Fisch had at Arizona because the floor is higher, but the schedule is tougher even with hosting both Oregon and Ohio State at home.

OFFENSE
The offense never could really get going in Fisch's first season because of the inexperienced line that allowed a Big Ten-worst 39 sacks. Kansas State transfer Carver Willis was one of the best tackles in the portal and guard Geirean Hatchett (Oklahoma) came back to UW to start next to his brother Landon.

Demond Williams Jr. had a breakout performance vs. Louisville in the Sun Bowl (26/32 for 374 yards, four TD plus a rushing TD). He has an outstanding running mate in the backfield with Jonah Coleman (193-1,053-10) returning.

There is talent in the receiving room as well with Denzel Boston (63-834-9) back, to go along with transfer Omari Evans (Penn State) and freshman All-America TE Decker DeGraaf.

DEFENSE
Six-foot-four corner Tacario Davis was with Fisch for two seasons at Arizona and is now back with him and his former teammate and fellow corner Ephesians Prysock at Washington. The Huskies allowed just 166.5 YPG through the air, second-best in the nation last year.

FIU transfer CJ Christian and returner Makell Esteen, combined with the 6-foot-4 corners, should make the secondary the strength of the entire unit once again.

However, the rush defense did not hold up in the second half of the season, so Washington reinforced the front seven through the portal with linebackers Xe'ree Alexander (UCF), Jacob Manu (Arizona), Taariq Al-Uqdah (Washington State) entering the fray along with Ta'ita'I Uiagalelei (Arizona), Simote Pepa (Utah) and Anterio Thompson (Michigan) on the line.

OUTLOOK
There is a distinct possibility that Washington may be one of the most improved teams in the Big Ten this season without much difference being made in the overall record.

Williams is a much better fit for the offense than Will Rogers was, and the Huskies should be more explosive there, but the line is still a concern. Defensively, they should be solid as well with an infusion of talent.

However, they are not likely upsetting Ohio State or Oregon at home, so they must try and steal victories at Michigan and/or at Wisconsin. A mild improvement to 7-5 looks likely.

prediction

UNDER 7.5 WINS

WISCONSIN
BADGERS

Head Coach: Luke Fickell (4th)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 4-8 ATS, 6-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

13
OFFENSE: 5
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	MIAMI OHIO	-16.1	35.5
9/6	MIDDLE TENN ST	-27	25
9/13	at Alabama	+20.7	67.5
9/20	MARYLAND	-9.9	42
10/4	at Michigan	+13.2	60
10/11	IOWA	+1.6	53
10/18	OHIO ST	+17.4	69
10/25	at Oregon	+17.3	64
11/8	WASHINGTON	-0.6	51.5
11/15	at Indiana	+7.8	55
11/22	ILLINOIS	+3.5	54.5
11/29	at Minnesota	+2.5	49.5

SOS
52.03
(#2 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.2/0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
200-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
30-1

CFP CHAMPION
500-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	22.2	101	24	44
YARDS PER POINT	15.7	97	14.7	62
PLAYS PER GAME	66.4	90		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:03	92		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	34.5%	114	40.8%	79
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	347.2	99	352.3	40
YARDS PER PLAY	5.2	89	5.4	60
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.6	88		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	152.1	73	168.8	90
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.4	60	4.6	88
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.7	65		
COMPLETION %	56.5%	109	63.3%	92
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	195.1	99	183.5	14
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.3	118	6.7	38
TURNOVERS	1.5	78	1.1	101

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

49.5 CONFERENCE: #11 of 18
NATIONAL: #39 of 136

Luke Fickell was a much-ballyhooed hire to get the Wisconsin program back to the Barry Alvarez era. However, the Badgers are just 13-13 since his arrival. Wisconsin failed to make a bowl game last season breaking a 23-year long bowl streak.

The Badgers are going to attempt to go back to basics and return to the identity that made them successful with a power running game. Phil Longo's "Air Raid" offense always seemed like a square peg in a round hole, so Jeff Grimes comes in as OC from Kansas to build a modern power-running offense.

That is a good first step, but it will be tough to implement against this schedule that includes road games at Alabama, Michigan, Oregon, and Indiana, plus a home game vs. Ohio State.

OFFENSE
For the third consecutive season, a transfer QB is given the keys to the offense as Billy Edwards Jr. arrives from Maryland. Edwards threw for 15 TDs and ran for five and new OC Grimes wants to implement some zone reads and play action passes to go along with the power running game.

Darrion Dupree (317 yards), Cade Yacamelli (274 yards, 8.3 YPA), and Dilin Jones, a redshirt last year, lead a deep backfield behind a line that returns three starters.

Leading receiver Vinny Anthony II (39-672-4) returns and will receive some help on the other side with Ohio State transfer Jayden Ballard along with Trech Kekahuna, who caught 25 balls as a freshman.

DEFENSE
Mike Tressel came with Fickell from Cincinnati upon arrival to Madison. Last year, his defense struggled against the run (165 YPG, 91st nationally), so he went searching for size up front. He may have found it with UT-Martin transfer Charles Perkins and Western Michigan's Corey Walker (5.5 sacks).

The Badgers also only gained 12 takeaways last season, so linebackers Christian Allegro, Tackett Curtis, and Louisville transfer Mason Reiger will be asked to cause havoc in the middle.

Four starters return in the secondary including 2023 All-American Ricardo Hallman and Preston Zachman, but the group will miss do-everything safety and leading tackler Hunter Wohler.

OUTLOOK
Wisconsin has the right idea of getting back to what made them successful in the first place. Edwards could inject energy into the offense, but he has a certain ceiling and is just kind of ok.

Changing offensive concepts is certainly in order, but it will take a while for the players to unlearn the "Air Raid".

Plus, they must do that against an absolute nightmare schedule that includes three of last year's playoff teams – Oregon, Ohio State, and Indiana – plus Alabama, Michigan, Iowa, and Illinois. This looks like a transitional year reset for Wisconsin.

prediction

UNDER 5.5 WINS

CONFERENCE USA
preview

Coverage by
Adam Burke

When I think about Conference USA, I think about going to a Vegas buffet. No, not one like Bacchanal at Caesars or The Buffet at Wynn. Maybe more like if Luxor or Harrah's still had one. Maybe Casino Royale, though that seems a tad harsh.

In any event, Conference USA is like having a plate of random food, most of it lukewarm, but it does the job. This conference got completely picked apart by the AAC, which added Charlotte, Florida Atlantic, North Texas, Rice, UAB, and UTSA a few seasons ago. Now, it seems like the only open door for teams transitioning from FCS to FBS, as Jacksonville State, Sam Houston State, and Kennesaw State have all made the leap via Conference USA.

As it turns out, there are two more new teams this season, as Delaware and Missouri State have given us 136 FBS teams for 2025. Neither of them is eligible to win the conference during their transitional phase, so you won't see them listed among the futures odds.

I may be overly critical of this conference, but it did rank 12th in terms of divisions by mean rating for Jeff Sagarin last season, as he did separate the Sun Belt into East and West and also the Independents were their own category. But, the average rating for C-USA teams was lower than that of the Missouri Valley Conference and just a few points above the Big Sky.

As mentioned, there were 134 FBS teams last season. Per Sagarin, five of the 10 teams in C-USA ranked 135th or worse. Jacksonville State, who has to replace head coach Rich Rodriguez and pretty much the entire roster, was the only team in the top 100 (78th). Sam Houston State, who ranked second at 106th, also has to replace a head coach, as K.C. Keeler went to Temple. Speaking of coaches, Louisiana Tech's Sonny Cumbie has the hottest seat in America entering this season.

But, this is a conference you do want to familiarize yourself with because they have Tuesday and Wednesday games in October to get some ESPN exposure, so you'll be seeing a lot more of them than you might like.

2025 projected standings

TEAM	2024 SM PR	HOME FA	ROAD FA	SS (RANK)	ALL PRJW'S	ALL PRJL'S	CONF PRJW'S	CONF PRJL'S	DRAFTKINGS O/U
LIBERTY	40	2.4	0.2	27.39 (136)	9.5	2.5	6.7	1.3	8.5
W KENTUCKY	35	2.8	0.3	29.76 (129)	7.8	4.2	5.8	2.2	7.5
JACKSONVILLE ST	31	2.9	0.4	28.47 (134)	6.5	5.5	4.6	3.4	6.5
LOUISIANA TECH	30	2.5	-0.6	31.55 (120)	6.0	6.0	4.3	3.7	5.5
SAM HOUSTON ST	29	2	0.4	34.63 (96)	4.9	7.1	4.3	3.7	4.5
MIDDLE TENN ST	25	2.6	-0.3	28.48 (133)	5.1	6.9	3.5	4.5	4.5
UTEP	26	2.4	-0.1	31.8 (118)	4.9	7.1	3.5	4.5	5.5
FLA INTERNATIONAL	26	2.1	-0.6	30.94 (125)	4.9	7.1	3.3	4.7	5.5
NEW MEXICO ST	24	3	0.1	28.59 (131)	5.0	7.0	3.1	4.9	4.5
DELAWARE	25.5	2.8	-0.2	29.62 (130)	4.5	7.5	3.1	4.9	5.5

DELAWARE
FIGHTIN' BLUE HENS
Head Coach: Ryan Carty (4th)
2024 Record: 9-2 SU & 6-5 ATS, 7-4 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS
15 OFFENSE: 7 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	DELAWARE ST	-36.1	-7.5
9/6	at Colorado	+24.3	47
9/13	CONNECTICUT	+9.9	38.5
9/20	at Fla International	+2.8	26
10/3	W KENTUCKY	+7	35
10/15	at Jacksonville St	+8.6	31
10/22	MIDDLE TENN ST	-3.6	25
11/1	at Liberty	+17.1	40
11/8	LOUISIANA TECH	+1.1	30
11/15	at Sam Houston St	+5.7	29
11/22	at Wake Forest	+15	38
11/29	UTEP	-2.4	26

SOS
29.62
(#130 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.8/-0.2
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
NA

MAKE PLAYOFF
NA

CFP CHAMPION
NA

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME				
YARDS PER POINT				
PLAYS PER GAME				
TIME OF POSSESSION				
3RD DOWN CONV. %				
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME				
YARDS PER PLAY				
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME				
RUSH YARDS PER GAME				
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT				
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME				
COMPLETION %				
PASSING YARDS PER GAME				
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT				
TURNOVERS				

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
25.5 CONFERENCE: #8 of 12
NATIONAL: #126 of 136

Delaware makes the leap from the CAA to C-USA, as the Fightin' Blue Hens sail into uncharted waters for the first time. Their FBS transition means that they will be ineligible to win the conference title this season and cannot make a bowl game. Ryan Carty's team also got stripped of the chance to make a third straight FCS Playoffs appearance, as the Division I-AA bylaws prevent teams making the move to FBS to be postseason-eligible in their final year.

Carty, who played QB at Delaware from 2002-06 and was followed by some guy named Joe Flacco, went 26-11 in three seasons with the Blue Hens prior to this move. He brings a lot of returnees for this year's roster, but there will be challenges and growing pains, particularly with the larger number of scholarships available at the FBS level that often leaves transitioning teams a bit depth-shy at the outset.

OFFENSE
At least Carty has two solid, experienced quarterbacks to rely on. Zach Marker had a 10/0 TD/INT ratio and threw for over 1,000 yards before suffering a season-ending injury four starts into the year after incumbent starter Ryan O'Connor suffered one three starts into the season. Nick Minicucci took over for the final four games and hung a 10/3 TD/INT ratio. So, Carty has two viable QBs to go to this season and also an enticing UCF transfer in Riley Trujillo.

Carty was the OC at Sam Houston State with K.C. Keeler, who was the head coach at Delaware from 2002-12, so if you watched Bearkats football after their move to FBS, you'll see a lot of similar concepts. In two FBS seasons, the Bearkats have scored 20.0 and 23.8 PPG with 4.6 and 5.0 yards per play. Keeler didn't bring as much returning talent and production into his first season as Carty does, though the Blue Hens do have to replace their leading rusher and receiver.

DEFENSE
The level of competition is absolutely increasing, but DC Manny Rojas has had a fine unit more often than not in his six seasons leading that side of the ball. Delaware allowed 21 PPG last season and just 5.3 YPP, including 3.4 yards per carry. He returns a lot of production here and this was a defense that rotated a lot of guys, as only one player had more than 44 tackles. That said, this is not a pressure-heavy defense, with a top mark of 28 sacks in the Rojas years, and a few seasons with 20 or fewer.

C-USA is not a prolific offensive conference by any means, but the battles in the trenches become much more difficult from one level to the next. The defensive line is Delaware's greatest area of concern with a base 3-3-5 unit. Stuffing the run has been a strength with linebackers and safeties free to make plays, but that may change at this level.

OUTLOOK
Delaware plays seven straight games to end the season, with four of them on the road. With the two byes grouped close together and obvious depth concerns, this is a team likely to run out of gas late in the year. You're paying a heavy price on Under 5.5, but it's probably worth it.

prediction
UNDER 5.5 WINS

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL
PANTHERS

Head Coach: Willie Simmons (1st)
2024 Record: 4-8 SU & 8-4 ATS, 8-4 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

6 OFFENSE: 3 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 3

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/29	BETHUNE-COOKMAN	-30.6	-2.5
9/6	at Penn St	+45.3	68
9/13	FLA ATLANTIC	+0.7	29.5
9/20	DELAWARE	-2.8	25.5
10/4	at Connecticut	+16	38.5
10/14	at W Kentucky	+12.4	35
10/21	KENNESAW ST	-5.7	22.5
10/29	at Missouri St	+0.8	23.5
11/8	at Middle Tenn St	+2.2	25
11/15	LIBERTY	+12.1	40
11/22	JACKSONVILLE ST	+3.3	31
11/29	at Sam Houston St	+5.6	29

SOS
30.94
(#125 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.1/-0.6
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
16-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

	OFFESE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	24.9	80	24	44
YARDS PER POINT	13.6	50	14.8	56
PLAYS PER GAME	63.1	122		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:57	95		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	32.1%	125	33.1%	14
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	338.6	103	355.5	46
YARDS PER PLAY	5.4	78	5	30
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.1	91		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	121.3	103	192.5	108
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.6	109	4.6	86
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	27.5	99		
COMPLETION %	60.6%	72	57.7%	25
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	217.4	75	163.1	1
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.9	35	5.9	5
TURNOVERS	1.5	78	1.4	66

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

26.0 CONFERENCE: #6 of 12
NATIONAL: #124 of 136

Another reset at FIU for a program that hasn't had a winning season since 2018. This time, Willie Simmons, who was most recently Duke's running backs coach, will be at the helm. He was the head coach at Florida A&M from 2018-23, so he has experience in that role and experience looking for diamonds deep in the Sunshine State rough, which is what the Panthers have to target from a recruiting standpoint.

Of course, Pitbull's name is on the stadium, so maybe Mr. Worldwide, who is paying $1.2 million annually for the naming rights, will be funding a better product with all of the NIL money floating around these days. If so, we don't really see it this season, as FIU has brought in some transfers, but not many high-profile ones. After a trio of 4-8 seasons under Mike MacIntyre, expectations remain very low.

OFFENSE
With over 48,000 students and one of the five highest enrollments in the nation, it really is surprising that FIU hasn't been able to find virtually any success. Butch Davis had some for a couple years, but when the administration sat on their wallets, the program fell into disrepair. We'll see if Simmons, who was successful at both Florida A&M and Prairie View A&M, can change the culture and reputation of the Panthers program.

Keyone Jenkins had a solid 22/8 TD/INT ratio, so Simmons, a QB at Clemson and The Citadel, has a good building block at the most important position. Most everything else on offense is brand new. The top returning receiver had seven catches last season. The offensive line is totally rebuilt and I don't see senior Kejon Owens holding on to the starting role at running back. This is a big job for OC Nick Coleman, who was at UAB with Bryant Vincent, who is a good offensive mind.

DEFENSE
Even though FIU went just 4-8 last season, this was a very competitive defense for DC Jovan Dewitt. Dewitt was actually one of the coaches kept from the MacIntyre regime, as his unit only allowed 5.2 yards per play and 25.8 PPG. The Panthers were actually a top-50 defense in yards per play and 11th in the nation in third-down defense.

Unfortunately for Dewitt, he has to mostly start from scratch. The top nine tacklers, including Travion Barnes (129) and four others who had at least 79 tackles, are all gone. Some transfers in the secondary could help offset the losses, but this looks like a FIU defense that is going to probably drop off a bit this season.

OUTLOOK
While the schedule isn't terribly daunting, bowl eligibility for the first time since 2019 is a very lofty goal from the oddsmakers and the betting market. I simply can't see it. The defense was last season's strength and that looks likely to regress. The offense is learning a new scheme and is missing proven pass catchers.

prediction
UNDER 5.5 WINS

JACKSONVILLE STATE
GAMECOCKS

Head Coach: Charles Kelly (1st)
2024 Record: 9-5 SU & 8-6 ATS, 8-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

6 OFFENSE: 3
DEFENSE: 3

SOS
28.47
(#134 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.9/0.4
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+800

MAKE PLAYOFF
100-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	36	6	26.1	65
YARDS PER POINT	12.3	14	15	47
PLAYS PER GAME	69.9	55		
TIME OF POSSESSION	27:01	122		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	41.1%	53	41.8%	84
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	443.4	13	393	80
YARDS PER PLAY	6.3	14	5.5	63
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	45.9	3		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	253	3	176.7	97
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.5	8	4.3	67
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	22.4	128		
COMPLETION %	60.4%	73	60.2%	56
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	190.4	104	216.3	57
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.5	13	7.4	71
TURNOVERS	1.1	31	1.7	28

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
31.0 CONFERENCE: #3 of 12
NATIONAL: #106 of 136

Persistence certainly paid off for new Jacksonville State head coach Charles Kelly, who actually started his professional career with the Gamecocks back in 1994 as the running backs coach. Interestingly, he was the defensive backs coach the next year, the offensive coordinator the season after that, and never coached offense again. Kelly's career comes full circle now with his first chance to be a head coach, succeeding Rich Rodriguez, who went back to West Virginia.

Jacksonville State joined the FBS ranks in 2023 and has been a major surprise, posting an 18-9 record and a first-year bowl victory under RichRod. But, with RichRod gone and most of the roster with him, either due to transfers or graduation, it looks like the Gamecocks will undergo a pretty major rebuild for at least this season, if not more.

OFFENSE
To say that the losses on offense are heavy is an understatement. Dual-threat QB Tyler Huff had 29 total touchdowns, with 15 on the ground and 14 through the air. In total, he racked up nearly 4,000 yards. Tre Stewart had 25 rushing touchdowns, trailing only Bryson Daily and Ashton Jeanty. He was also fifth in the nation in rushing yards behind Jeanty, Cam Skattebo, Omarion Hampton, and Daily.

Not only will the personnel be overhauled, but so will the offensive scheme, as Clint Trickett is now the OC and we may see a lot more passing plays. The Gamecocks were third in the nation in rushing plays behind two service academies. Kentucky transfer Gavin Wimsatt, who was the 25th-ranked QB in his class, got a ton of Power Five offers, but hasn't really latched on anywhere.

DEFENSE
Even though Jacksonville State had 646 running plays, they had explosive plays and played with tempo, so they were actually 126th in the nation in time of possession and that left the defense on the field a lot. The Gamecocks faced the fourth-most plays against and all of the teams that faced more played 16 games to Jacksonville State's 14. So, what this defense was able to do being on the field a ton was really impressive, as they allowed just over 26 PPG and 5.6 yards per play.

That was, however, an increase of nearly 5 PPG and nearly a full yard per play from 2023, so the effects of being a somewhat undermanned FBS newcomer were on display in Year 2, along with only four returning starters. This defense brings back even less of last season's production. Two 100+ tacklers are gone, along with virtually all of last season's 25 sacks.

OUTLOOK
The early success has spoiled the fans and the school, but 2025 is going to be a rough year. Conference USA isn't good on the whole, so Jacksonville State could find a few wins with the weak schedule, but this is a brand-new team with an unproven head coach. The vig is very heavy on Under 6.5, but that's the side to take and if alternate season win totals open up, I'd even consider Under as low as 4.5.

prediction

UNDER 6.5 WINS

KENNESAW STATE
OWLS

Head Coach: Jerry Mack (1st)
2024 Record: 2-10 SU & 5-7 ATS, 4-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

12 OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 8

schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/29	at Wake Forest	+17.9	38
9/6	at Indiana	+35	55
9/13	MERRIMACK	-13.7	10.5
9/20	ARKANSAS ST	+8.3	33.5
9/27	MIDDLE TENN ST	+0	25
10/9	LOUISIANA TECH	+4.7	30
10/21	at Fla International	+5.7	26
10/28	UTEP	+1.2	26
11/8	at New Mexico St	+4.6	24
11/15	at Jacksonville St	+11.5	31
11/22	MISSOURI ST	-1	23.5
11/29	at Liberty	+20	40

SOS
30.35
(#126 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.2/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
40-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	16.8	127	31.8	104
YARDS PER POINT	15.1	89	13.4	92
PLAYS PER GAME	63.8	115		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:23	83		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	36.5%	94	40.3%	75
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	254.2	133	426	106
YARDS PER PLAY	4	132	6	99
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38.4	36		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	119	106	178.6	98
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.1	125	4.7	94
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	23.8	122		
COMPLETION %	53.1%	125	68.3%	127
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	135.2	128	247.4	101
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	5.7	130	8.1	100
TURNOVERS	1.5	67	1	108

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

22.5 CONFERENCE: #12 of 12
NATIONAL: #132 of 136

The first season as a FBS member was not a fun one for Kennesaw State. The team went 2-10, but the wins and losses became a secondary story. That's because after leading the transition to FBS, head coach Brian Bohannon was fired. While the school claimed that Bohannon resigned, the program was thrown into a major state of flux. It's hard to know exactly what happened, but the Owls were an underdog in all 12 games and somehow beat Liberty as a 26-point pup.

Before moving to Conference USA, Kennesaw State was running the option under Bohannon. They changed that approach in 2023 and went just 3-6 and then last year's 2-10, so maybe the athletic department and the school administration were upset with that change, but Jerry Mack and OC Mitch Militello aren't going to run the option. In fact, this could be a major departure from what they've been doing.

OFFENSE
Militello is a Josh Heupel disciple, so we should see a lot more tempo from Kennesaw State this season. With three transfer quarterbacks - Dexter Williams (Georgia Southern), Tommy Ulatowski (Kent State), and Amari Odom (Wofford) - we could see a timeshare or a "hot hand" approach at the position. The offense with the previous regime was very weak, averaging just 16.5 PPG and 4.02 yards per play. That was the lowest YPP in the nation and the sixth-lowest PPG.

Maybe that's what ultimately got Bohannon fired. Either way, there are a lot of new faces here, which is fine because it is a completely new install on offense and returning production is an oxymoron when there really was no production. That said, Williams is the only sort of impact transfer after originally going to Indiana. Even though there are a lot of upperclassmen on the offense, there aren't a lot of game reps or statistics.

DEFENSE
The defense actually does boast a good amount of returning production, as six of the top seven tacklers are back in the mix. This wasn't a stout defense by any means, with over 31 PPG allowed and over six yards per play. But, it does help to have some players back in the mix because the offense might have a lot of three-and-outs. Improving in the red zone will be key, as opponents scored a touchdown on nearly 70% of their red-zone trips.

DC Marc Mattioli has mostly coached defensive backs and that was a position of emphasis in the transfer portal. I actually think this defense could be pretty decent, even if the stats don't show it because they are likely to be on the field a lot. This side of the ball does appear to be well ahead of the offense, especially with the idea of installing a Heupel-esque playbook.

OUTLOOK
Kennesaw State was outscored by an average of 32-19 in C-USA play last season and their wins over Liberty and FIU were by four combined points. They even lost by double-digits to UT Martin. Kennesaw State doesn't get Sam Houston State or Delaware on the schedule and three of the last four games are on the road. I don't see this team improving by two wins.

prediction

UNDER 3.5 WINS

LIBERTY
FLAMES

Head Coach: Jamey Chadwell (4th)
2024 Record: 8-4 SU & 3-9 ATS, 5-6-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

14 OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	MAINE	-28.2	14
9/6	at Jacksonville St	-6.3	31
9/13	at Bowling Green	-8.6	29.5
9/20	JAMES MADISON	+0	42
9/27	at Old Dominion	-2.5	35
10/8	at UTEP	-11.8	26
10/14	NEW MEXICO ST	-18.3	24
11/1	DELAWARE	-17.1	25.5
11/8	MISSOURI ST	-18.7	23.5
11/15	at Fla International	-12.1	26
11/22	at Louisiana Tech	-7.7	30
11/29	KENNESAW ST	-20	22.5

SOS
27.39
(#136 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.4/0.2
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+125

MAKE PLAYOFF
10-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	27.6	60	23.5	40
YARDS PER POINT	14.8	81	15.1	39
PLAYS PER GAME	70.5	50		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:08	64		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	41.0%	55	36.6%	40
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	408.8	42	354.8	43
YARDS PER PLAY	5.8	45	5.2	43
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	44.7	5		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	248.8	4	158.3	73
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.6	7	4	51
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	23.9	121		
COMPLETION %	52.9%	126	58.7%	35
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	160	123	196.5	34
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.7	100	7.1	53
TURNOVERS	1.5	78	1.4	66

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
40.0 CONFERENCE: #1 of 12
NATIONAL: #76 of 136

After a 13-1 showing in his first season in Lynchburg, Virginia, the belief was that Jamey Chadwell's team would run the table and could actually be in the discussion for the College Football Playoff spot. Well, Liberty went 8-4, losing as a 26-point favorite to Kennesaw State for their first loss of the season. Something felt off about this team from the jump, as they barely beat New Mexico State as a 22.5-point favorite in their first conference game and also needed overtime to beat FIU as 17.5-point chalk.

But, I think Liberty will get back to their more dominant ways this season. Chadwell inherited a special player in Kaidon Salter, but maybe not one that fit his offense overly well. In his third season, I can't help but think that Chadwell now has the personnel that he wants.

OFFENSE
Among that personnel is former Coastal Carolina QB Ethan Vasko. Vasko was recruited while Chadwell was the head man of the Chanticleers, so this is a pretty obvious fit. Salter actually had a really underwhelming season last year with a 15/6 TD/INT ratio and 587 yards on the ground with seven rushing touchdowns. Liberty ran the ball more than 65% of the time last season. That's not how Chadwell's offenses operated at Coastal, and frankly, I don't think that's how he wants this offense to run.

So, Vasko's presence should turn the Flames into a much more balanced team, if not one that swings more on the pass-happy side. The team's leader in receptions and yards is gone, but Treon Sibley led with 28 catches for 510 yards. All of the others are back and most are now in Year 2 or Year 3 of this offense. With nearly 2,000 rushing yards and 18 rushing touchdowns out the door, Chadwell needs to find a back, but I think that gives even more incentive to pass the ball.

DEFENSE
There are a lot of returnees on defense, which is a good thing for Liberty in this day and age. Usually, the better Group of Five teams become a department store for the Power Four schools looking to fill holes, but Chadwell has three of his top five tacklers back, including leading tackler Joseph Carter. In Chadwell's two seasons, the Flames have allowed 24.3 and 23.5 points per game and 5.7 and 5.4 yards per play.

That being said, the Flames had 45 sacks back in 2022 during Hugh Freeze's final season. The Flames have 45 sacks over the last two seasons. Furthermore, in a really bad offensive conference, the Flames only forced 13 turnovers in eight games and only had 15 for the season as a whole. Somebody will have to step up and be more of a playmaker this year.

OUTLOOK
Personally, I think Liberty should be the odds-on favorite to win Conference USA, not a plus-money price. The vig on Over 8.5 wins is steep, but I firmly believe this team gets 10+ wins during the regular season. The second favorite in the conference is Western Kentucky and Liberty would only play them if they meet in the conference title game.

prediction

OVER 8.5 WINS

LOUISIANA TECH
BULLDOGS

Head Coach: Sonny Cumbie (4th)
2024 Record: 5-8 SU & 8-5 ATS, 5-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

9 OFFENSE: 6 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 3

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	SE LOUISIANA	-11.9	20.5
9/6	at LSU	+36.2	62.5
9/13	NEW MEXICO ST	-8.4	24
9/20	SOUTHERN MISS	-3	30
9/27	at UTEP	-1	26
10/9	at Kennesaw St	-4.7	22.5
10/21	W KENTUCKY	+2.8	35
10/31	SAM HOUSTON ST	-3.1	29
11/8	at Delaware	-1.1	25.5
11/15	at Washington St	+8.3	35
11/22	LIBERTY	+7.7	40
11/29	at Missouri St	-3.2	23.5

SOS
31.55
(#120 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.5/-0.6
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+900

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	20.6	112	21.3	21
YARDS PER POINT	16	102	14.9	54
PLAYS PER GAME	71.9	31		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:19	30		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	39.3%	71	35.4%	31
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	330.3	109	317.8	13
YARDS PER PLAY	4.6	125	4.7	15
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.9	55		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	110.1	113	142	48
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3	130	3.8	27
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	31.8	53		
COMPLETION %	63.1%	43	57.1%	15
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	220.3	71	175.8	8
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.9	86	6.2	14
TURNOVERS	1.3	50	1.3	71

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
30.0 CONFERENCE: #4 of 12
NATIONAL: #109 of 136

As if life wasn't hard enough for Louisiana Tech, the Bulldogs head into this season with a coach in Sonny Cumbie who has third-degree burns on his backside, and it will be the program's last season in Conference USA. A move to the Sun Belt is coming soon and that is a significantly better football conference than C-USA, so a program that got gifted a bowl game appearance last season, but hasn't had a winning season since 2019, is up against it.

Even though it's Cumbie on the hot seat, Jeremiah Johnson was the most important coach on the sidelines last season, as his defense bailed out an atrocious offense enough to win five games and break a string of three straight 3-9 seasons. Cumbie will need something similar out of DC Luke Olson, who was most recently the DC at Jacksonville State.

OFFENSE
What's weird about the offense being so bad is that Cumbie is, and has always been, an offensive-minded coach. The 43-year-old Cumbie played at Texas Tech and threw for 4,742 yards in 2004 to lead the nation. He is a Mike Leach disciple and a big believer in the Air Raid offense. After Cumbie's playing days were over, he was a GA at Texas Tech and then an assistant coach, OC, and even interim HC after seven seasons at TCU.

At LA Tech, though, Cumbie is just 11-26 overall and last year's offense had 20.9 PPG, just 4.8 YPP, and allowed 42 sacks. On the plus side, Evan Bullock had a 66% completion rate and a 14/3 TD/INT ratio once he took over. So maybe Cumbie finally has his QB. Tru Edwards, who accounted for 33.1% of the team's receptions and 34% of the receiving yards, is gone, so that's a big loss, but this style of offense will allow someone to step up.

DEFENSE
Johnson excelled in his first year as DC after a quick stop at Kent State following a stellar tenure at Northern Iowa. Last year's defense allowed just 21 PPG and 4.7 YPP, an improvement of 12.4 PPG and 1.4 YPP over what the team did in 2023. The Bulldogs went from 107th in YPP to a top-10 ranking and from 117th in PPG to 26th. No defense in the nation improved more.

Olson now has a rebuilt unit with only three returning starters. What's surprising is that the Bulldogs only had 22 sacks, but allowed just 3.6 yards per carry. Most of that talent in the trenches is gone. Furthermore, LA Tech had 17 takeaways and 12 were fumble recoveries. So, unfortunately, I do see this defense regressing unless the backups turned starters and the JUCO transfers come together quickly.

OUTLOOK
The schedule is manageable and both Western Kentucky and Liberty visit Ruston, so two of the hardest C-USA games are at home. Plus, the non-conference slate isn't too bad, except for a random trip to Pullman to face Washington State in mid-November. But, Cumbie just might not be a very good head coach. The Bulldogs are 4-12 in one-score games on his watch.

prediction
UNDER 5.5 WINS

MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE
BLUE RAIDERS

Head Coach: Derek Mason (2nd)
2024 Record: 3-9 SU & 3-9 ATS, 6-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

15 OFFENSE: 7 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	AUSTIN PEAY	-12.9	14.5
9/6	at Wisconsin	+27	49.5
9/13	at Nevada	+4.5	27
9/20	MARSHALL	+4.7	32
9/27	at Kennesaw St	+0	22.5
10/8	MISSOURI ST	-3.9	23.5
10/22	at Delaware	+3.6	25.5
10/29	JACKSONVILLE ST	+3.8	31
11/8	FLA INTERNATIONAL	-2.2	26
11/15	at W Kentucky	+13.1	35
11/22	SAM HOUSTON ST	+1.8	29
11/29	at New Mexico St	+2.3	24

SOS
28.48
(#133 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/-0.3
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
15-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	16.8	127	35.1	117
YARDS PER POINT	21	133	13.1	100
PLAYS PER GAME	65.8	95		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:01	68		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	36.6%	93	49.3%	127
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	353.7	90	459	122
YARDS PER PLAY	5.4	77	6.6	125
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	27.5	131		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	88	130	208.8	119
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.2	122	5.2	112
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.7	25		
COMPLETION %	64.4%	34	67.8%	125
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	265.7	21	250.2	108
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.4	60	9.2	131
TURNOVERS	1.6	88	0.8	121

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
25.0 CONFERENCE: #9 of 12
NATIONAL: #128 of 136

To say that Year 1 for Derek Mason was a dud would be an understatement. The former Vanderbilt head coach is back in the Nashville area, but this time in Murfreesboro with the Blue Raiders. Replacing Rick Stockstill, who was the head coach at MTSU from 2006-23, is not an easy task, but a 3-9 showing was the program's worst season since going 2-10 in 2011.

For a team that only beat Tennessee Tech, Kennesaw State, and UTEP last season, hope may actually be on the horizon. Mason and his assistants brought in some accomplished JUCO talent and a pretty good recruiting class by C-USA standards. The team goes from seven returning starters to more than double that and everything usually improves in Year 2.

OFFENSE
The offense certainly should improve. MTSU scored just 18.1 PPG, rushed for a paltry 91 yards per contest, and was very one-dimensional by virtue of trailing a lot. To have well over 400 pass attempts and score just 18.1 PPG is embarrassing, especially in this conference. The Blue Raiders only scored 20 PPG in league play. So, Bodie Reeder's offense has to get a lot better for MTSU to exceed expectations.

It could happen, as Nicholas Vattiato is back for his second season in this offense and he threw for over 3,000 yards last season. The running back room should be stronger with Jekail Middlebrook as more of a feature back and Rickey Hunt, who had over five yards per carry at Ohio. The team's two best WRs are gone, but that was a position of emphasis in the portal.

DEFENSE
Maybe the defense will help the offense more this season as well. Middle Tennessee only had 10 takeaways in 12 games last season. They also generated very little pressure with 20 sacks. The secondary also allowed the seventh-highest completion percentage in the nation. Defense is supposed to be Mason's bread and butter as a longtime DC and defensive assistant, so that rising tide could lift all boats if he gets more from that group.

The Blue Raiders were in the bottom 10 in yards per play allowed and also gave up over five yards per carry, along with the sixth-worst third-down defense, as opponents converted over 48% of the time. This was also a bottom-20 red-zone defense by TD%. So, a lot of things need to change, but Mason's transitional year is over and this should be more of the roster he wants.

OUTLOOK
Because Conference USA is so weak, I don't think it takes much to massively improve year over year. MTSU avoids Liberty and UTEP and clearly has a better roster. A bit of positivity about this team seems to be the prevailing sentiment with juice on Over 4.5 wins, but I think this team can get to six wins and bowl eligibility, if not more.

prediction

OVER 4.5 WINS

MISSOURI STATE
BEARS

Head Coach: Ryan Beard (3rd)
2024 Record: 8-4 SU & 6-6 ATS, 6-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

9 OFFENSE: 4 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 5

SOS
32.96
(#112 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/0.2
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
NA

MAKE PLAYOFF
NA

CFP CHAMPION
NA

schedule

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME				
YARDS PER POINT				
PLAYS PER GAME				
TIME OF POSSESSION				
3RD DOWN CONV. %				
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME				
YARDS PER PLAY				
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME				
RUSH YARDS PER GAME				
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT				
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME				
COMPLETION %				
PASSING YARDS PER GAME				
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT				
TURNOVERS				

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
23.5 CONFERENCE: #11 of 12
NATIONAL: #131 of 136

The other FBS newcomer is Missouri State, who went 8-4 last season and 6-2 in conference play in the very stacked Missouri Valley Conference. The Bears were blown out by both North Dakota State and South Dakota State to end the season, but they won every game they were favored in and even crushed Illinois State as a road pup.

Unfortunately, the timing of the move to Conference USA is less than ideal, as a ton of talent left the program on both sides of the ball. This is a Louisville-led coaching staff with Ryan Beard at the helm, along with OC Nick Petrino and DC LD Scott, who all worked together with the Cardinals, and at Missouri State, under Bobby Petrino. And they may be in for quite a rude awakening in Year 1.

OFFENSE
QB Jacob Clark is back after posting a 26/6 TD/INT ratio and over 3,600 passing yards, but who he will throw to and who will take handoffs is up for debate. Clark will be down his top two receivers and top two running backs. This was a big-play offense with 6.7 yards per pop and a pass-happy unit with over 300 passing yards per game. Of course, they also gave up 40 sacks and have allowed at least 40 sacks in four of the last five seasons.

One of the big differences between FBS and FCS is the number of available scholarships. Of course, we could also lump funding, boosters, NIL collectives, and stuff like that into the mix. More often than not, the teams that make the leap are undermanned and lack depth. The only position on offense with decent depth is QB. Missouri State is very small at running back and unproven at WR.

DEFENSE
Given that the offense was the side of the ball that really stood out between the two last season, this defense could take a hit as a byproduct of some offensive regression. Missouri State allowed over 30 points per game and 5.8 yards per play. In Beard's first season at the helm, they allowed 30.3 PPG and 6.2 YPP, so there was a very modest improvement in YPP, due in large part to an increase of 14 sacks.

The top five tacklers from last season are gone, including leading sack man Darion Smith with seven. Jalen Williams had 6.5 sacks and he, too, is gone. Eight of Missouri State's 12 interceptions are also gone. With so many impact players gone on a defense that was below average last season, what will this season have in store?

OUTLOOK
Conference USA is a soft landing for a transitioning team because it isn't a very good conference, but Kennesaw State and Sam Houston State are teams that recently made the leap and struggled badly in their first season. Missouri State plays USC, Marshall, and SMU right out of the gate and gets Liberty and UTEP late. Five wins is a stretch.

prediction

UNDER 4.5 WINS

NEW MEXICO STATE
AGGIES

Head Coach: Tony Sanchez (2nd)
2024 Record: 3-9 SU & 5-7 ATS, 7-3-2 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

9 OFFENSE: 5 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 4

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	BRYANT	-21.2	5.5
9/6	TULSA	-4.6	22.5
9/13	at Louisiana Tech	+8.4	30
9/27	at New Mexico	+5.4	27.5
10/2	SAM HOUSTON ST	+2.4	29
10/14	at Liberty	+18.3	40
10/22	MISSOURI ST	-3.3	23.5
11/1	at W Kentucky	+13.7	35
11/8	KENNESAW ST	-4.6	22.5
11/15	at Tennessee	+38.6	59.5
11/22	at UTEP	+4.3	26
11/29	MIDDLE TENN ST	-2.3	25

SOS
28.59
(#131 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3/0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
28-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	21.5	107	38.1	126
YARDS PER POINT	15.2	90	12	124
PLAYS PER GAME	70	54		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:46	98		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	36.8%	90	46.0%	116
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	327.1	111	455.5	121
YARDS PER PLAY	4.7	121	6.4	111
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	40.6	16		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	176.4	40	207.8	118
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.3	67	5.2	115
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	27	103		
COMPLETION %	45.1%	134	57.4%	19
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	150.7	126	247.6	102
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	5.6	132	8.1	104
TURNOVERS	2	123	0.8	121

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
24.0 CONFERENCE: #10 of 12
NATIONAL: #130 of 136

Big names and television networks drive college football, so there weren't nearly enough people talking about the job that Jerry Kill did at New Mexico State in 2022 and 2023. This is a program that had one bowl game appearance dating back to 1960 when Kill took over and all he did was go 17-11 in two seasons with two bowl appearances and a bowl victory over Bowling Green in the 2022 Quick Lane Bowl.

Former UNLV head coach Tony Sanchez took over the Aggies for 2024 and they were back to their usual ways with a 3-9 season featuring bad offensive and defensive numbers. The offense scored about six fewer points per game and the defense allowed 13.5 more PPG. Kill deserves a statue on campus in Las Cruces.

OFFENSE
Tyler Wright was promoted from special teams coordinator and TE coach to offensive coordinator, but that lasted four weeks, as offensive and disparaging X posts were found from before he was on the New Mexico State coaching staff. Offensive line coach Andrew Mitchell took over for the season and then moved on to Oklahoma State. In response, Sanchez brought in longtime college coach David Yost, who was most recently at FIU. Over three seasons with the Panthers, Yost improved the unit by a full yard per play and nearly eight points per game.

Yost actually has quite a bit to work with here. Fresno State and Montana QB Logan Fife takes over for a group that posted just a 12/10 TD/INT ratio last season. The top two rushers are gone, but Dijon Stanley was a noteworthy recruit at Utah a few seasons ago. The top two receivers are back. The offensive line is very large by Group of Five, and especially C-USA, standards.

DEFENSE
I actually think the offense will be pretty decent. It's the defense that has to improve. New Mexico State was -10 in fumble recoveries, as they only had one of them on defense, leading to a -13 turnover margin. So, that's one area that could improve naturally. The Aggies were also -17 in sack margin, another area that desperately needs to improve. Second-year DC Joe Morris didn't have a potent pass rush at Sam Houston State when he was the Bearkats' DC, but they were way better against the run than the Aggies were.

This is one of those cases where returning production is a bit of an oxymoron and a new set of players isn't a bad thing. That said, the back seven does return some of its best players, including leading tackler Tyler Martinez. There appear to be some promising portal additions as well.

OUTLOOK
The back half of the season is a bear for the Aggies with Liberty, Western Kentucky, Tennessee, and UTEP and all of them are on the road. But, this should be a team that gets off to a good start. Frankly, they could open the season 5-0 and I wouldn't be surprised. Truthfully, anything less than 4-1 is a major disappointment and then we only need to find another win somewhere.

prediction
OVER 4.5 WINS

SAM HOUSTON STATE
BEARKATS

Head Coach: Phil Longo (1st)
2024 Record: 10-3 SU & 7-6 ATS, 4-9 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

8
OFFENSE: 5 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 3

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/23	at W Kentucky	+8.4	35
8/29	UNLV	+13.1	43.5
9/6	at Hawaii	+6.5	33
9/20	at Texas	+43.1	69.5
10/2	at New Mexico St	-2.4	24
10/9	JACKSONVILLE ST	+0.4	31
10/15	UTEP	-5.1	26
10/31	at Louisiana Tech	+3.1	30
11/8	at Oregon St	+13.6	39.5
11/15	DELAWARE	-5.7	25.5
11/22	at Middle Tenn St	-1.8	25
11/29	FLA INTERNATIONAL	-5.6	26

SOS
34.63
(#96 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2/0.4
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
11-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	23.8	92	20.5	19
YARDS PER POINT	14.6	75	15.7	25
PLAYS PER GAME	69.8	56		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:01	22		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	38.8%	76	38.1%	54
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	348	98	321.5	15
YARDS PER PLAY	5	104	4.8	20
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	42.8	8		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	179.8	33	144.5	53
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.2	72	4	48
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	24.8	119		
COMPLETION %	67.4%	16	62.9%	89
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	168.2	120	177	9
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.8	95	6.3	18
TURNOVERS	1.2	35	2.1	6

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
29.0 CONFERENCE: #5 of 12
NATIONAL: #113 of 136

Longtime offensive coordinator Phil Longo gets his first crack as a FBS head coach, but he'll replace a Sam Houston State legend to do it. K.C. Keeler decided to return to the Philadelphia area by taking over at Temple and the Bearkats opted to move quickly to reunite with Longo, who was the offensive coordinator from 2014-16. Longo has a blank slate to work with on both sides of the ball as he looks to put his stamp on the program for a second time.

Keeler did one of the best coaching jobs in the nation last season, as Sam Houston went from 3-9 to 10-3, but the Bearkats did win all six one-score games that they played, including the New Orleans Bowl over Georgia Southern. It is hard to see a rebuilt roster very light on experience replicating anything close to last season.

OFFENSE
Hunter Watson is the most notable returnee on offense, but Longo did bring Mabrey Mettauer with him from Wisconsin, where he recruited him as the OC. Watson had a pedestrian 12/8 TD/INT ratio for an offense that averaged just 23.8 points per game and 5.0 yards per play, so his job is hardly safe. Several transfers are likely to see time, as the Bearkats replace their top two running backs and nearly their entire WR corps.

Longo didn't seem to fit well at Wisconsin, but his offenses were thoroughly productive at North Carolina, Ole Miss, and right here in Huntsville. We should see more tempo and more passing from this year's Bearkats, but I'm not sure that's a great recipe with a brand-new defense and questionable QB play.

DEFENSE
The Bearkats were a defensive juggernaut last season. The team finished +12 in turnover margin thanks to 27 takeaways, including 16 interceptions, and improved by 1.1 yards per play year over year. This was a top-15 defense by YPP and third in the nation in yards per attempt against.

Unfortunately, the top returning tackler had 16 tackles. Zero of the team's 28 sacks are back. Two players who had four interceptions are out. DC Freddie Aughtry-Lindsay comes in from NC State and will call plays for the first time since 2019. The best-case scenario might be that Sam Houston replicates their 2023 numbers with 26.2 PPG and 5.9 YPP allowed. As mentioned, that team went 3-9.

OUTLOOK
Rebuilding year is an overused term in college football because the transfer portal and all of the other personnel changes can create a rebuild at any given time. This is the dictionary definition of it. Even without Liberty on the schedule, I really don't think the Bearkats can get to five wins. They look like they'll start 0-4 and a 5-7 finish would be quite a feat.

prediction
OVER 4.5 WINS

UTEP
MINERS

Head Coach: Scotty Walden (2nd)
2024 Record: 3-9 SU & 5-7 ATS, 6-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

11 OFFENSE: 6 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 5

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	at Utah St	+6	29.5
9/6	TENN-MARTIN	-0.8	27.5
9/13	at Texas	+46.6	69.5
9/20	LA MONROE	-0.3	28.5
9/27	LOUISIANA TECH	+1	30
10/8	LIBERTY	+11.8	40
10/15	at Sam Houston St	+5.1	29
10/28	at Kennesaw St	-1.2	22.5
11/8	JACKSONVILLE ST	+3	31
11/15	at Missouri St	+0.3	23.5
11/22	NEW MEXICO ST	-4.3	24
11/29	at Delaware	+2.4	25.5

SOS
31.80
(#118 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.4/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
14-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	19.1	120	32.8	110
YARDS PER POINT	16.3	107	12.3	115
PLAYS PER GAME	69.2	67		
TIME OF POSSESSION	27:53	117		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	33.1%	122	38.6%	57
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	311.5	122	405	90
YARDS PER PLAY	4.5	126	5.4	62
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.5	62		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	120.5	105	172	93
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.3	120	4.2	58
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.5	66		
COMPLETION %	59.7%	80	61.4%	69
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	191	102	233	81
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.3	122	7.7	85
TURNOVERS	1.7	104	1.6	38

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

26.0 CONFERENCE: #7 of 12
NATIONAL: #125 of 136

The final season in Conference USA will be this one for UTEP, as they'll join the new-look Mountain West next season. While that change won't take place until 2026, changes have taken place in advance of this season, as head coach Scotty Walden had to hire two new coordinators. DC JJ Clark took a job with the Dallas Cowboys and OC Mark Cala joined the staff, though Walden calls the plays on offense.

For a group that managed just 4.8 yards per play and 19.5 points per game, maybe Walden should give up the play-calling duties, but there are a lot of hands in the offensive cookie jar with Walden, an OC, and two co-OCs. It sounds complicated for a team with one bowl appearance since 2014 and modest expectations for this season after a second consecutive 3-9 campaign.

OFFENSE
Skyler Locklear is the incumbent, but UTEP reined in a very splashy transfer in Malachi Nelson, who started at USC and then wound up at Boise State. Nelson was a five-star recruit per 247 Sports and the 13th-ranked player in the nation when he committed to the Trojans. Now 21, Nelson may get his chance to shine. Locklear had a 10/6 TD/INT ratio last season, but dealt with injuries.

Three of the team's top four receivers are back and in Year 2 of the spread, one-back offense. The offensive line is also pretty well-versed in this scheme, as injuries in the trenches gave several guys opportunities. It's entirely possible that this all comes together, but, again, this group scored fewer than 20 PPG last season. It's going to take a sizable leap to make a major difference.

DEFENSE
Walden seemingly made a strong hire with Montana State DC Bobby Daly, as the Bobcats were the national runner-up at the FCS level last season. Daly gets a group that had 36 sacks last season with a 3-3-5 base setup, but the top sack men from that unit are gone. Fortunately, there are some returnees familiar with the scheme at each level of the defense and that could make the transition a little bit smoother.

Two of UTEP's wins last season came in games where they allowed 35 points, although the win over Kennesaw State came in double overtime. Still, this group, much like the offense, has a long way to go to be a Conference USA contender. It does seem like a lot of C-USA teams got worse or stayed about the same, which is why there's some optimism about the Miners with some new hires and new players.

OUTLOOK
247 Sports has UTEP down for the best incoming class in C-USA and fourth-best transfer class, though the gap between No. 2 and No. 7 is essentially the gap between No. 1 (Western Kentucky) and No. 2 (Jax State). So, UTEP has improved the talent on the roster. I don't think six wins is a huge ask, despite Utah State and Texas in the non-conference.

prediction

OVER 5.5 WINS

WESTERN KENTUCKY
HILLTOPPERS

Head Coach: Tyson Helton (7th)
2024 Record: 8-6 SU & 7-7 ATS, 6-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

5 OFFENSE: 1
DEFENSE: 4

schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/23	SAM HOUSTON ST	-8.4	29
8/30	N ALABAMA	-22	16
9/6	at Toledo	+7.4	40
9/20	NEVADA	-10.7	27
9/27	at Missouri St	-9.1	23.5
10/3	at Delaware	-7	25.5
10/14	FLA INTERNATIONAL	-12.4	26
10/21	at Louisiana Tech	-2.8	30
11/1	NEW MEXICO ST	-13.7	24
11/15	MIDDLE TENN ST	-13.1	25
11/22	at LSU	+30.3	62.5
11/29	at Jacksonville St	-1.4	31

SOS
29.76
(#129 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.8/0.3
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+400

MAKE PLAYOFF
40-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	24.5	84	26.5	69
YARDS PER POINT	15	85	15.4	32
PLAYS PER GAME	63.8	117		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:01	112		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	40.5%	60	45.7%	114
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	367.2	78	407.4	96
YARDS PER PLAY	5.8	49	6	100
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	31.6	108		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	109.2	115	223.6	129
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.5	113	5	104
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.2	72		
COMPLETION %	71.9%	4	66.4%	118
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	258	34	183.8	15
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.6	12	8.6	122
TURNOVERS	1.8	112	1.5	52

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

35.0 CONFERENCE: #2 of 12
NATIONAL: #94 of 136

Tyson Helton is the longest-tenured coach in C-USA and it's fair to say that he also has the most consistent program. In six seasons at Western Kentucky, Helton has had one losing campaign and it was the 2020 COVID season, which was a weird one for just about everybody. Otherwise, Helton has won eight or nine games in all of the other seasons. Players and coaches have come and gone, but Helton has almost always found a way to put a good team on the field.

The losses from last season are rather enormous, so Helton is under a bit more pressure to get the team up to its usual standards. Only one starter returns on offense and virtually everybody of consequence is gone on defense. Oh, and he's replacing his coordinators as well. And yet, between reputation and the way he's filled holes in the past, some might say that Western Kentucky and Liberty are on a crash course in the conference title game.

OFFENSE
The Hilltoppers are replacing their starting quarterback, running back, top four wide receivers, and four starters on the offensive line. Here's the thing, though. Last season's 24.9 points per game were the fewest since that COVID season and 5.5 points fewer than what they scored in 2023. The running game was the worst of Helton's tenure and the overall yards per play were the lowest since 2020. So, while Western Kentucky is replacing a lot of the depth chart, the offense largely underperformed.

Helton's new OC is Rick Bowie, who was at Valdosta State and Abilene Christian. Bowie brought his QB, Maverick McIvor, with him. McIvor will be throwing to one holdover in KD Hutchinson and a bevy of transfers, but Bowie looks like a strong hire and McIvor doesn't have a learning curve with the playbook. I actually think the offense will be better this season compared to last.

DEFENSE
There was a lot of smoke and mirrors to the WKU defense last season. They allowed five yards per carry for the first time in Helton's tenure and gave up 5.9 yards per play, which was also a disappointing number relative to Helton's other seasons. They were outgained on average in C-USA play and somehow gave up under 25 points per game overall and in league action.

The new co-DCs were simply elevated from their position coach roles after Tyson Summers left for Colorado State. Da'Von Brown and Davis Merritt don't have a lot of experience and virtually no returning production to work with, but the Hilltoppers always find a way to be competent on this side of the ball.

OUTLOOK
I'll be honest - I think this is the hardest team to gauge in the conference. Like I said, Helton always finds a way and he's lost big players and big coordinators before. The Hilltoppers avoid Liberty and only get one Power Four opponent instead of two. I have to give Helton the benefit of the doubt in a weak conference.

prediction
OVER 7.5 WINS

INDEPENDENTS
preview

Coverage by
Adam Burke

Well, there isn't much to say about the Independent "conference," as Notre Dame and UConn are the two teams without a conference affiliation this season. UMass was one of them last year, but the Minutemen are back in the MAC.

UConn was part of the AAC from 2013-19. The basketball program obviously deserves a big platform and they get it in the Big East, but the Big East dissolved into the AAC in football over a decade ago and the Huskies just play whoever they can add to the schedule these days.

As for Notre Dame, whose basketball program is part of the ACC, the football program remains an orphan, but that may be an advantage. The Fighting Irish don't have to worry about winning a conference for their postseason placement and can also be selfish with their toys. All of the economic windfall from last season's National Championship appearance stayed in their pockets, as they didn't have to share with other conference members.

As a result, ND should have some nice and deep pockets for their NIL budget. They already did, but anything that adds to the pool can only help in the current landscape of college football.

The Irish are a CFP contender once again and the Huskies will flirt with making a bowl game for the second straight season and for the first time in consecutive seasons since 2007-10.

2025 projected standings

TEAM	2024 SM PR	HOME FA	ROAD FA	SS (RANK)	ALL PRJW'S	ALL PRJL'S	CONF PRJW'S	CONF PRJL'S	DRAFTKINGS O/U
NOTRE DAME	65.5	3.1	0.8	47.23 (25)	10.6	1.4		0.0	10.5
CONNECTICUT	38.5	2.9	-0.3	31.31 (122)	7.8	4.2		0.0	7.5

CONNECTICUT
HUSKIES

Head Coach: Jim Mora (4th)
2024 Record: 9-4 SU & 7-4-2 ATS, 7-4-2 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

11 OFFENSE: 7 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 4

SOS
31.31
(#122 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.9/-0.3
HOME/ROAD

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	29.3	47	23.6	43
YARDS PER POINT	12.9	27	15	51
PLAYS PER GAME	71.6	35		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:05	66		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	37.7%	84	29.8%	4
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	378.8	67	353.5	42
YARDS PER PLAY	5.3	84	5	33
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	39.7	26		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	192.7	23	133.5	35
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.9	31	3.9	39
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.8	64		
COMPLETION %	55.6%	114	61.9%	74
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	186.1	107	220	60
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.1	124	6.5	25
TURNOVERS	1.3	50	1.3	80

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
38.5 CONFERENCE: #2 of 2
NATIONAL: #78 of 136

With more than 130 teams and an inherent bias towards the Power Four conferences and the College Football Playoff chase, so many things go unnoticed over the course of a season. Take, for instance, the fact that UConn won nine games for the first time since 2007. Jim Mora's team went from 3-9 to 9-4 with the ninth win coming over North Carolina in the Fenway Bowl.

The Huskies took care of business when they were supposed to, as they won all of their games in favorite roles during the regular season and had losses by 5, 3, and 7 to ACC teams. Repeating that level of success in Storrs will not be easy, as there is a lot of turnover on the roster, but things look dramatically better now than they did during Randy Edsall Part Deux and the Bob Diaco years.

OFFENSE
The offense was actually a source of frustration for a lot of UConn fans and bettors. It felt like Mora kept trying to force Nick Evers into the lineup, even though Joe Fagnano had a 20/4 TD/INT ratio and was obviously the better choice at the position. Evers was battling various ailments throughout the season and is more of a dual-threat option, but he had a 5/5 TD/INT ratio. It seems like the timeshare could be back again.

The 1-2 punch of Cam Edwards and Durell Robinson is just a one-punch now, though change-of-pace back Mel Brown slides up the depth chart. Edwards had 5.7 yards per carry and so did Brown, while Robinson was the home run hitter with 6.8 YPC. Top WR Skyler Bell is back after having 355 more receiving yards than anybody else. The skill positions and QB seem pretty locked in, but an OL that gave up just 14 sacks and has allowed just 44 over the last three seasons has some turnover.

DEFENSE
Mora gave up DC duties in 2024 and that paid off quickly. Matt Brock's defense improved by a full yard per play and 6.7 PPG. It looked dicey at first, as Maryland dropped 629 yards on the Huskies in the first game, but the unit locked down pretty well after that. Unfortunately for Brock, the top four tacklers are all gone and they combined for six interceptions, 18 QB hits, eight sacks, and 14.5 tackles for loss.

Defensive regression seems inevitable and UConn plays three teams coming off of byes when they have to play the week prior. They play Syracuse, Boston College, and Duke again and those are three games likely to hurt the season-long numbers.

OUTLOOK
This is a tough one. The three ACC games seem to limit the margin for error, but UConn does get some games against Conference USA doormats and what will probably be a bad Ball State team. Eight wins is not out of the question with only three Power Four games this season as opposed to four last season.

prediction
OVER 7.5 WINS

NOTRE DAME
FIGHTING IRISH

Head Coach: Marcus Freeman (4th)
2024 Record: 14-2 SU & 13-3 ATS, 9-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

14 OFFENSE: 7
DEFENSE: 7

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/31	at Miami Fl	-4.3	60
9/13	TEXAS A&M	-9.2	60
9/20	PURDUE	-33.4	35
9/27	at Arkansas	-12.1	52
10/4	BOISE ST	-17.3	51
10/11	NC STATE	-21.8	47
10/18	USC	-13.5	55.5
11/1	at Boston College	-17.6	46.5
11/8	NAVY	-25	43
11/15	at Pittsburgh	-16.1	47.5
11/22	SYRACUSE	-22.3	46.5
11/29	at Stanford	-26.6	38

SOS
47.23
(#25 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3.1/0.8
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
NA

MAKE PLAYOFF
-190

CFP CHAMPION
12-1

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	36.1	5	15.5	3
YARDS PER POINT	11	2	19.9	2
PLAYS PER GAME	64.7	108		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:09	63		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	41.1%	54	32.1%	8
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	399.1	47	307.8	10
YARDS PER PLAY	6.2	21	4.6	9
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.3	78		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	201	17	138.4	42
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.7	4	3.8	31
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	27.8	95		
COMPLETION %	66.7%	20	52.1%	1
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	198.1	97	169.4	4
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.1	74	6	9
TURNOVERS	0.9	22	2.1	7

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

65.5 CONFERENCE: #1 of 2
NATIONAL: #6 of 136

The Irish did a lot of fighting last season, as they were one of four teams to play 16 games. It was the Year 3 leap you dream of when hiring a new head coach, as Marcus Freeman went from 9-4 to 10-3 to 14-2. While the Irish ultimately fell short against Ohio State, they played some incredible defense in the playoff to offset some bad offensive numbers, especially when Riley Leonard was playing hurt.

Leonard is gone now, but a big chunk of the team remains, so the studs of South Bend are ready to try and run it back. Freeman does have a new DC, and that's the other big development from this past offseason, but the level of continuity with this roster is a rarity in present-day college football.

OFFENSE
The most important position on the field is the biggest question mark for ND. Leonard had a 21/8 TD/INT ratio and had 17 rushing touchdowns, as the Fighting Irish were pretty thin at WR and didn't get as much from TE Mitchell Evans as they thought they would. But, Jeremiyah Love and Jadarian Price are both back and make up arguably the best running back tandem in the nation.

So, CJ Carr, Kenny Minchey, Blake Hebert, and Anthony Rezac all have a lot of help around them, including a couple of excellent WR transfers in Malachi Fields and Will Pauling. Collectively, the QB options for ND have 21 snaps at the college level. That will put some pressure on the offensive line to not only provide some time to throw, but also open holes for a run-heavy offense.

DEFENSE
Chris Ash is the new DC, as he replaces Al Golden, who is now the DC of the Cincinnati Bengals. Ash has been around the block at both the collegiate and NFL levels, so this really shouldn't be a downgrade, especially with a lot of talent back. Jack Kiser and Xavier Watts are not back, as two of the three Notre Dame defenders taken in April's NFL Draft. But, a lot of other top contributors are back.

And, as they did on offense, Notre Dame went to the portal with their newfound funds and filled a gap in the secondary with DeVonta Smith, a local player Freeman scouted when he was Cincinnati's DC. Smith was actually originally committed to Ohio State as a four-star recruit. So, the Notre Dame defense should be on par or close to last season's group with a lot back and some new talent on the two-deep.

OUTLOOK
It is still wild to think that Notre Dame lost to Northern Illinois last season. They do not play the giant-killing Huskies this season, but that does make the overall degree of difficulty on the schedule much higher. In fact, they have no MAC schools after playing two last year and the only non-Power Four games are Boise State and Navy. Nevertheless, they should be favored in all 12 games.

prediction

OVER 10.5 WINS

MAC preview

Coverage by
Adam Burke

A 13th team and six new head coaches are the biggest storylines in the Mid-American Conference this year. Most of the top teams have experienced and tenured head coaches, but some of the middling teams and bottom-feeders are looking for a spark and hope that they have found one.

This is an even more difficult conference to gauge nowadays with college football free agency than it used to be. In the past, the MAC was just a conference with a lot of mediocre teams, so everybody kind of beat everybody except for the two or three teams that really stood out, usually Toledo, Ohio, and Miami of Ohio. Bowling Green, Western Michigan, and Northern Illinois would have moments, but sustained success was hard to come by.

These days, any good players from Group of Five conferences are at risk of being poached by power programs. It is much easier to throw some NIL money at a developed, proven player than to attempt to get a freshman to not only stay, but also develop over the first couple of seasons in the program. So, blue bloods and higher-revenue teams simply go shopping in the MAC, American, Sun Belt, and Mountain West.

The teams who are less impacted than others in the MAC for this season are the favorites and make up the well-defined top tier of the conference. The others will hope for lightning in a bottle or a new voice to allow them to be competitive.

Most bettors don't really care about the MAC until MACtion begins in November. While it is true that we have plenty of sample size to evaluate by that time, the paycheck games and the early-season non-conference tilts against comparable opponents can lead to some good betting opportunities right from the outset.

2025 projected standings

TEAM	2024 SM PR	HOME FA	ROAD FA	SS (RANK)	ALL PRJW'S	ALL PRJL'S	CONF PRJW'S	CONF PRJL'S	DRAFTKINGS O/U
TOLEDO	40	2.7	0.1	28.08 (135)	8.9	3.1	6.4	1.6	8.5
OHIO U	38	2.7	0.1	33.17 (109)	7.6	4.4	6.0	2.0	7.5
BUFFALO	34	2.4	-0.1	28.53 (132)	7.4	4.6	5.4	2.6	7.5
MIAMI OHIO	35.5	2.7	0.1	32.81 (114)	6.6	5.4	5.1	2.9	6.5
N ILLINOIS	31	1.8	0.5	30.21 (127)	6.2	5.8	4.5	3.5	6.5
BOWLING GREEN	29.5	2.1	0.6	31.52 (121)	5.6	6.4	4.3	3.7	6.5
C MICHIGAN	28	2.5	-0.4	30.94 (124)	5.3	6.7	4.1	3.9	5.5
W MICHIGAN	28.5	2.4	-0.1	33.19 (108)	4.9	7.1	3.7	4.3	5.5
AKRON	25	1.8	-0.2	29.81 (128)	4.8	7.2	3.3	4.7	4.5
E MICHIGAN	27	2.3	0.2	31.56 (119)	4.5	7.5	3.2	4.8	4.5
MASSACHUSETTS	21	1.8	-0.4	31.21 (123)	3.6	8.4	2.3	5.7	3.5
BALL ST	21	2.8	-0.3	32.83 (113)	3.2	8.8	2.3	5.7	3.5
KENT ST	15.5	2.2	-0.5	34.28 (99)	2.2	9.8	1.5	6.5	1.5

AKRON
ZIPS

Head Coach: Joe Moorhead (4th)
2024 Record: 4-8 SU & 6-6 ATS, 8-4 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

7 OFFENSE: 5 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 2

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	WYOMING	+6.8	34
9/6	at Nebraska	+30.6	53
9/13	at UAB	+5	27.5
9/20	DUQUESNE	-11.6	15
9/27	at Toledo	+17.9	40
10/4	C MICHIGAN	+0.8	28
10/11	MIAMI OHIO	+8.8	35.5
10/18	at Ball St	-1	21
10/25	at Buffalo	+11.6	34
11/4	MASSACHUSETTS	-6.2	21
11/11	KENT ST	-11.8	15.5
11/18	at Bowling Green	+6.8	29.5

SOS
29.81
(#128 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
1.8/-0.2
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
20-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
75-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	19.5	118	33.1	111
YARDS PER POINT	16.7	113	13	104
PLAYS PER GAME	65.2	103		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:19	108		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	35.8%	101	39.3%	67
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	325.2	113	430.1	111
YARDS PER PLAY	5	103	6.1	103
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.6	126		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	104.8	118	191.1	107
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.7	104	4.7	95
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.1	33		
COMPLETION %	54.7%	119	65.1%	106
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	220.4	70	239	94
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.5	113	8.4	113
TURNOVERS	1.6	88	0.7	128

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

25.0 CONFERENCE: #10 of 13
NATIONAL: #129 of 136

It feels ridiculous to start with Akron, whose season is pretty much over before it starts on an annual basis, but is truly over before it starts this season. The Zips are banned from bowl contention because of their low APR scores. Their Academic Progress Rate failed to meet the NCAA benchmarks, so the bowl drought, which dates back to a 50-3 drubbing by Florida Atlantic in the 2017 Boca Raton Bowl, will be extended another season.

But, we're going alphabetically with our team previews, so we begin with the Zips in what looks to be another throwaway season in the Rubber City. It's something of a shame, as Akron's four wins were the most since 2018 and matched the first two seasons for Joe Moorhead and surpassed the three seasons of Tom Arth from 2019-21.

OFFENSE
On one hand, Moorhead, who has been regarded as a sharp offensive mind, has been a decent hire for the Zips. They have scored over 20 PPG in two of three seasons with him at the helm, something that they hadn't done since 2017. The Zips won three conference games last season. They won four over the previous four seasons combined. On the other hand, the low APR scores are a bad reflection on him and the players within the program.

Ben Finley is back to lead the offense after posting a 16/9 TD/INT ratio last season. The top two rushers and the top three wide receivers are gone. And while 20.4 PPG and 5.2 YPP are good for a program like Akron, those are not good numbers for an offense. The Zips were 110th in yards per play and 120th in points per game. In a wasted season, maybe Moorhead plays a potential QB of the future late in the year.

DEFENSE
For the three Moorhead seasons, Tim Tibesar has been by his side as the DC. In those years, Akron is a combined -33 in turnover margin and -72 in sack margin. The Zips did allow 151 points in three games against Power Four opponents to skew the numbers, but they still allowed 27 PPG in conference play and only had 13 sacks while finishing -7 in TO margin.

As I've said with other conferences, "returning production" is an oxymoron with a lot of bad units. Akron only has two returning starters on defense and both are in the secondary. There are a ton of JUCO transfers and low-rated recruits on both sides of the ball, but especially the defense. The top five tacklers are gone from a unit that only had three interceptions last year. This will be a bad defense again.

OUTLOOK
The Zips get one bye week during the season, as their season will end on November 18 against Bowling Green. Their other bye week is what would've been the final week of the regular season. The schedule is not terribly difficult and the non-conference schedule is much softer, but this roster stinks and the team has no tangible goals.

UNDER 4.5 WINS

BALL STATE
CARDINALS

Head Coach: Mike Uremovich (1st)
2024 Record: 3-9 SU & 7-5 ATS, 9-2-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

7 OFFENSE: 3
DEFENSE: 4

SOS
32.83
(#113 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.8/-0.3
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
70-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
150-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	23.8	90	40.6	131
YARDS PER POINT	14.3	67	11.5	130
PLAYS PER GAME	69.3	63		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:17	57		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	39.9%	67	49.6%	129
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	339.9	102	468.6	126
YARDS PER PLAY	4.9	108	6.9	131
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.2	115		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	96.5	121	187.1	103
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.2	123	5.4	124
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.5	24		
COMPLETION %	62.8%	45	62.2%	81
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	243.5	43	281.5	127
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.7	103	9	128
TURNOVERS	1.2	45	1.3	76

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

21.0 CONFERENCE: #11 of 13
NATIONAL: #134 of 136

Mike Uremovich decided to make the move from Indianapolis to Muncie, as the former head coach of the Butler Bulldogs gets his first FBS opportunity at Ball State. Outside of a major outlier in 2020 with a 7-1 record, Mike Neu held on to this job for a very long time with just one winning season and two bowl game appearances. Maybe Uremovich can up the standards, but he inherits very little from last season's team.

The Midwest ties run deep for Uremovich, who got his Bachelor's degree at Purdue and his Master's degree at Northern Illinois. He's primarily coached in Illinois and Indiana with the exception of stints at NC State and Temple. Uremovich wants to run the ball. Butler ran for nearly 215 yards per game last season, so his focus with this team will be on the offensive line and the running backs.

OFFENSE

Frankly, that's probably a good thing because QB Kadin Semonza posted a 25/10 TD/INT ratio and 2,904 passing yards last season, but transferred to Tulane. This is going to be more of an option offense and Semonza didn't fit that, so he was wise to leave. Kiael Kelly and Walter Taylor, a big 6-foot-5 Colorado transfer, are likely to both see action. QB runs are a massive part of the offense and were a big reason why Butler had over 200 yards per contest on the ground.

The top three rushers from last season are gone, so Uremovich, who will function as his own OC alongside pass game coordinator Craig Harmon, has to find somebody to be the bell cow. The role of the wide receivers will be diminished in this offense, so the fact that nobody returns with more than 23 catches is a non-factor.

DEFENSE

This is where Ball State could make some strides. Last year's defense had one returning starter and gave up over 40 points per game. This unit was 132nd in yards per play against and points per game, better than only Kent State and Tulsa in both categories. Strangely, DC Jeff Knowles kept his job, but that's because he was Uremovich's DC previously at Butler. Apparently that was an indicator as to the direction the Ball State athletic department wanted to go.

A handful of starters are back and maybe Year 2 will be better, but the offense playing with more ball control should help. That being said, Ball State only faced an average of 65 plays per game on defense last season and still got shredded. Even conference opponents in a bad conference hung 37 PPG.

OUTLOOK

Woof. This is a depressing outlook for the Cardinals. Uremovich is overhauling everything on offense and it seems unlikely that much will change on defense. The only saving grace for Ball State is that they play New Hampshire, Akron, and Kent State at home. Of course, that also means they have to find another win somewhere.

prediction

UNDER 3.5 WINS

BOWLING GREEN
FALCONS

Head Coach: Eddie George (1st)
2024 Record: 7-6 SU & 6-7 ATS, 5-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

6 OFFENSE: 5
DEFENSE: 1

SOS
31.52
(#121 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.1/0.6
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
10-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
100-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	25.9	72	22	25
YARDS PER POINT	14.3	65	14.9	53
PLAYS PER GAME	67.9	74		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:09	19		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	37.9%	83	34.4%	26
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	369.3	74	328	22
YARDS PER PLAY	5.4	75	5.1	38
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.7	103		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	122.8	101	145.6	55
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.8	94	4.4	73
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	33.1	41		
COMPLETION %	65.7%	24	57.6%	23
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	246.5	42	182.4	13
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.5	57	6.3	17
TURNOVERS	0.9	20	1.2	96

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

29.5 CONFERENCE: #6 of 13
NATIONAL: #111 of 136

Eddie George is back in the Buckeye State. The College Football Hall of Famer and 1995 Heisman Trophy winner joined the coaching ranks in 2021 at Tennessee State and has now made the leap to the FBS ranks at Bowling Green. He was only 24-22 at Tennessee State, but 9-4 in his final season, which included a playoff berth and a little bit of hardware as the Big South-OVC Coach of the Year.

That was Tennessee State's first conference championship since 1999 and first playoff appearance since 2013. George probably expected to finish out his five-year deal, but then Bowling Green came calling after Scot Loeffler took a job with the Philadelphia Eagles. That also meant a late start in terms of recruiting and the transfer portal, which are the two biggest concerns for the Falcons this season.

OFFENSE
At least the QB position seems to be filled with three-time transfer Drew Pyne. Connor Bazelak is gone after posting an 18/5 TD/INT ratio and so is top pass-catcher Harold Fannin, who was taken by the Browns in the third round. All of the skill positions need an overhaul, but the one positive is that the most experienced part of the offense is the offensive line. That is especially important because we're likely to see heavier sets out of the Falcons offense with George and co-OCs Greg Nosal and Travis Partridge.

Tight ends and wide receivers will be expected to block in what will probably mirror more of an old-school, pro-style offense. I'm really intrigued to see how it goes because the MAC is not really known as a physical conference, but BG will attempt to be its most physical team.

DEFENSE
Unfortunately, there are only 11 players on the field at one time, so Jeff Fisher's son Brandon cannot run a 7-9 defense. All jokes aside, Fisher was the DC at Tennessee State and he'll bring his scheme to the Falcons. Like the offensive side of things, the defense is going to try to be extremely physical at the point of attack. The uptick in toughness certainly helped Tennessee State and I could see it doing the same at BG, at least over time.

To me, this side of the ball is far more concerning. One player with more than 25 tackles is back from a defense that was actually pretty good last season with 21.6 PPG and just 5.3 YPP. Bowling Green had 38, 33, and 33 sacks in the last three Loeffler seasons. Fisher's units were strong all four years at Tennessee State, but he has another rebuild on his hands.

OUTLOOK
Undoubtedly the most interesting team in the MAC. I think there's a wide range of outcomes here. So I'm torn, mostly because the non-conference schedule is brutal and BG plays four games against teams coming off of byes. They're only off of a bye themselves in one of them. That said, the Falcons do play Eastern Michigan, Akron, and UMass to end the season on a potential high note. If George has them going early, that's a nice finish.

prediction

OVER 6.5 WINS

BUFFALO
BULLS

Head Coach: Pete Lembo (2nd)
2024 Record: 9-4 SU & 8-5 ATS, 7-5-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

15 OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 9

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	at Minnesota	+18.2	49.5
9/6	ST FRANCIS PA	-31.7	4.5
9/13	at Kent St	-16.2	15.5
9/20	TROY	-1	35
9/27	CONNECTICUT	+1.8	38.5
10/4	E MICHIGAN	-9.2	27
10/18	at Massachusetts	-11.1	21
10/25	AKRON	-11.6	25
11/1	at Bowling Green	-2.3	29.5
11/12	at C Michigan	-3.4	28
11/19	MIAMI OHIO	-0.8	35.5
11/28	OHIO U	+1.7	38

SOS
28.53
(#132 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.4/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+400

MAKE PLAYOFF
100-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
--	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	28.8	49	27.5	76
YARDS PER POINT	12.2	11	14.8	58
PLAYS PER GAME	69.3	65		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:37	104		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	33.3%	121	37.4%	45
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	351.4	95	405.8	92
YARDS PER PLAY	5.1	99	5.6	75
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	40.6	18		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	165.8	54	155.3	68
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.1	78	4.3	61
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	26.9	105		
COMPLETION %	55.7%	113	60.6%	62
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	185.6	108	250.6	109
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.9	87	7.4	73
TURNOVERS	1	24	1.7	29

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

34.0 CONFERENCE: #4 of 13
NATIONAL: #98 of 136

Pete Lembo is a damn good football coach. Buffalo went from 3-9 to 9-4 last season in Lembo's first year, as he got back on the sidelines as the head man for the first time since 2016. The 55-year-old bounced around after leaving Ball State at the end of 2015, spending a couple years with Maryland, one with Rice, two with Memphis, and three with South Carolina before Buffalo hired him.

And all he did running his own program was take Buffalo to the best record they've had since 2018 and tie for the second-most wins in a season. Maybe the most impressive thing is that Lembo returns the bulk of his production from last season's Bahamas Bowl victors. Quarterback is not one of them, but the Bulls may have upgraded there anyway.

OFFENSE
As a side note, Lembo led Buffalo to their best special teams performance in quite some time, which was his role with the Gamecocks from 2021-23. The offense was on par with the 2021 version in terms of points per game and yards per play, but there is room for improvement and his name is Ta'Quan Roberson. The former UConn starter transferred in from Kansas State to replace CJ Ogbonna, who had a 19/5 TD/INT ratio and was the second-leading rusher.

Roberson can run around a bit, too, and he's probably a better passer than Ogbonna. Furthermore, Buffalo still has top rusher Al-Jay Henderson, who had over 1,000 yards, and top receiver Victor Snow. Those are rarities for G5 programs for this season. The offensive line is mostly intact and Buffalo has a great chance at their best offensive numbers since Lance Leipold was leading the program.

DEFENSE
The defense made some big strides last season as well, though maybe not in the areas that are most often mentioned. Buffalo improved by one point per game and 0.2 yards per play under first-year DC Joe Bowen, but they had 15 more sacks, 0.9 fewer yards per carry allowed, and 22 takeaways for a +9 turnover margin. Leading tackler and best defensive player Shaun Dolac is gone, taking 168 stops with him and a team-high five interceptions, but nearly everyone else is back.

Most notably, Kobe Stewart, who had 9.5 sacks, and Red Murdock, who had 14.5 tackles for loss. In Year 2 of the scheme, with a lot of the same talent, improvement is not only doable, but expected. After all, despite some gaudy individual numbers, the Bulls still gave up 29 PPG and over 420 yards on average in conference play.

OUTLOOK
The Bulls finished on a five-game heater last season, including a suffocating defensive performance against a heavily-depleted Liberty team. With others in the conference dropping back a bit, Buffalo may be the team in the best position to take advantage. They avoid Toledo in the regular season and may very well have a date with them in Detroit on December 5. I like 4/1 to win the MAC and Over 7.5 wins.

prediction

OVER 7.5 WINS

CENTRAL MICHIGAN
CHIPPEWAS

Head Coach: Matt Drinkall (1st)
2024 Record: 4-8 SU & 5-6-1 ATS, 6-5-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

10 OFFENSE: 3 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 7

schedule

SOS
30.94
(#124 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.5/-0.4
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
20-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	18.6	122	31.5	103
YARDS PER POINT	17.1	121	11.8	128
PLAYS PER GAME	65.7	96		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:49	75		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	35.3%	106	33.6%	19
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	317.9	117	371.3	60
YARDS PER PLAY	4.8	111	5.6	71
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38.5	34		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	174	43	168.1	87
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.5	49	4.6	87
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	24.9	118		
COMPLETION %	53.3%	122	60.7%	63
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	143.9	127	203.2	40
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	5.8	128	7.3	67
TURNOVERS	2.1	128	0.4	133

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

28.0 CONFERENCE: #8 of 13
NATIONAL: #118 of 136

Another team looking to get more physically at the point of attack is Central Michigan. Former Army offensive line coach Matt Drinkall has teamed up with former Eastern Washington OC Jim Chapin for what should be a new-look Chippewas team. In Jim McElwain's final season, the Chips did run it a lot more than they threw it, yet still finished -17 in turnover margin. Central Michigan was actually 125th in the nation in pass attempts and finished with more interceptions (12) than touchdowns (11).

The 22 turnovers on offense weren't great, but the five takeaways on defense were even worse. So, it wouldn't be a surprise to see Drinkall and Chapin put together a run-heavy scheme. Something new might work better than something old, seeing as how McElwain brought a sense of stability and improved culture to the program, but also had three straight losing seasons before retiring.

OFFENSE
As mentioned, Chapin was at Eastern Washington, which used to be one of the more prolific passing offenses in the nation. Due to injuries, Chapin switched gears last season and the Eagles found a ton of success running the rock. Perhaps we see more balance here, as it's not like the Chips have much experience on offense or a whole lot of returning production.

With Drinkall's background, though, running the ball makes sense and we're likely to see a much more disciplined Central Michigan team with a better gas tank across the board. The Chips were 105th in average penalty yards per game, so that's one easy area to fix. Joey Labas probably gets the first crack at QB, but everything should be up for grabs with the scheme change and a bunch of new faces.

DEFENSE
It goes without saying, but Sean Cronin will have to find some turnovers from his defense somewhere. I am inherently skeptical of defensive coaches that come from service academies because they can often lean on the offense's ability to condense the game and limit the opposition's play count and number of drives. Cronin was Army's defensive line coach last season.

Cronin does inherit a pretty experienced and productive front seven, but 19 pass breakups are gone from Da'Raun McKinney and Donte Kent. Kent was actually drafted in the seventh round. It's wild to think a DB would get taken from a team that had two interceptions, but that speaks to the type of athlete CMU has to replace. While the Chips lacked takeaways, they also allowed under 200 passing yards per game for the first time since 2018.

OUTLOOK
For a team that mustered fewer than 300 yards per game in MAC play, it seems to be a big ask to find enough improvement to qualify for a bowl game this season. Central Michigan plays at Akron and Kent State for two of their easier conference tilts. The Under 5.5 is a little juicy, but 5-7 or 4-8 seem more likely than 6-6 or better. It'll take time to get tougher at the line of scrimmage.

prediction

UNDER 5.5 WINS

EASTERN MICHIGAN
EAGLES

Head Coach: Chris Creighton (12th)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 7-5 ATS, 6-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

8 OFFENSE: 5
DEFENSE: 3

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	at Texas St Univ	+13.6	38
9/6	LIU POST	-22.6	7
9/13	at Kentucky	+23.3	48
9/20	LA LAFAYETTE	+9.4	38.5
9/27	at C Michigan	+3.3	28
10/4	at Buffalo	+9.2	34
10/11	N ILLINOIS	+2.2	31
10/18	at Miami Ohio	+11	35.5
10/25	OHIO U	+8.8	38
11/8	BOWLING GREEN	+0.8	29.5
11/15	at Ball St	-3.4	21
11/25	W MICHIGAN	-0.9	28.5

SOS
31.56
(#119 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.3/0.2
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
30-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	25	78	30.5	97
YARDS PER POINT	15.3	91	13.4	94
PLAYS PER GAME	77.9	3		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:14	31		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	42.1%	45	37.8%	50
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	383.1	60	406.8	94
YARDS PER PLAY	4.9	107	6.4	112
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	39.4	27		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	144.1	80	175.9	96
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.7	103	4.8	100
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.5	28		
COMPLETION %	60.1%	77	64.5%	103
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	239	50	230.9	76
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.7	98	9	129
TURNOVERS	1.5	78	1.1	101

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

27.0 CONFERENCE: #9 of 13
NATIONAL: #122 of 136

In a sport where loyalty is a laughable notion these days, Chris Creighton is in his 12th season with the Eagles. The 56-year-old fell short of a bowl game for the first time since 2017 in a non-COVID year, so there might be a little bit of pressure to perform better this season. Eastern Michigan was actually 5-2 with losses to Washington and Miami of Ohio before just completely falling apart at the end of the season.

Is it possible that Creighton lost the team a little bit? We may not know, but he has very little production back on either side of the ball. Missing a bowl game might have been a blessing in disguise since it gave Creighton and his assistants more time to go portal shopping with a big chunk of the roster to replace.

OFFENSE
Former Michigan State Spartan Noah Kim is back in-state, along with Maryland transfer Cameron Edge, so there's some Power Four flair to the quarterback room. That's good because Cole Snyder had 402 of the 416 pass attempts last season and 15 of the 17 passing touchdowns. Of course, he also had nine of the 10 interceptions and 33 of the 35 sacks. He wound up the second-leading rusher with just 323 yards and 2.4 yards per carry.

Top wideout Terry Lockett is back, but this was an underwhelming offense all the way around. Weber State transfer Dontae McMillan ran for nearly 1,700 yards over four seasons with the Wildcats, so maybe he'll inject some life into a dormant running game that hasn't had at least four yards per carry since 2016.

DEFENSE
Virtually everybody that played a big part on defense is gone. That may not be a bad thing, since the Eagles gave up over 400 yards per game and 32 points per contest in conference action. This was not a good offensive conference, but EMU struggled badly. The 2023 team badly overachieved going 6-7 with just 263 yards of offense per game and more than 400 allowed, so it seems like this past season was a bit of a correction on that front.

That means Creighton and his coaches are going to have to find a way to bring a little magic back with a team that was pretty accustomed to overachieving. We'll see if they can make it work for a ton of transfers on the roster and a bunch of backups that will get a chance to start. I'm not exactly optimistic, especially with a lot of new coaches and new schemes to contend with in the conference.

OUTLOOK
Creighton was 3-21 in his first two seasons and has gone 54-54 since. Last season's 3-6 showing in league play was the team's worst record since going 0-8 in 2015. I think the current landscape of college football is a lot for Creighton to overcome. You think of his better teams and he had time to cultivate players like Brogan Roback and Maxx Crosby. Times have changed.

prediction

UNDER 4.5 WINS

KENT STATE
GOLDEN FLASHES

Head Coach: Mark Carney (1st)
2024 Record: 0-12 SU & 3-9 ATS, 6-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

6 OFFENSE: 3
      DEFENSE: 3

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	MERRIMACK	-6.7	10.5
9/6	at Texas Tech	+41	53.5
9/13	BUFFALO	+16.2	34
9/20	at Florida St	+37.3	50
10/4	at Oklahoma	+46.2	58.5
10/11	MASSACHUSETTS	+2.9	21
10/18	at Toledo	+27.7	40
10/25	BOWLING GREEN	+12.4	29.5
11/5	at Ball St	+8.8	21
11/11	at Akron	+11.8	25
11/19	C MICHIGAN	+9.9	28
11/28	at N Illinois	+17.8	31

SOS
34.28
(#99 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.2/-0.5
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
200-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

	OFFESE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	13.6	131	46	134
YARDS PER POINT	16.8	114	11.4	131
PLAYS PER GAME	60.1	129		
TIME OF POSSESSION	26:59	124		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	19.0%	134	49.3%	128
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	228.5	134	525.2	134
YARDS PER PLAY	3.8	134	7	133
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	33.1	96		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	77.3	133	269.3	134
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	2.3	134	6	133
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	23.2	125		
COMPLETION %	45.5%	132	66.3%	116
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	151.2	125	255.9	114
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.5	112	8.7	125
TURNOVERS	1.7	104	0.9	115

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

15.5 CONFERENCE: #13 of 13
          NATIONAL: #136 of 136

November 26, 2022. That's the last time that Kent State beat a FBS team. The only win over the last two seasons for the Golden Flashes came against Central Connecticut State. Not only that, but Kent State has only covered five times in 24 games over the last two seasons, so they've been even worse than the very low Vegas expectations. Kenni Burns was placed on leave just before spring practice and Mark Carney took over as the interim head coach.

As you would expect, nothing is expected of Kent State this season, who even lost their two best players from last season in WRs Chrishon McCray and Luke Floriea. A team that got outscored 44-14 on average in 2024 and 35-15 in 2023 obviously needs a ton of work and more than a facelift. Good luck to Carney, whose first head coaching gig is this one.

OFFENSE

Tommy Ulatowski was the best QB on the roster last season and he's gone. Devin Kargman and Ruel Tomlinson ran the Carney offense last season and may not even start with Fordham transfer CJ Montes on the roster. Carney was the QB at Fordham, so there may be a little nostalgia in his decision. Well, that and Montes is probably the best hope on the roster. McCray and Floriea combined for 84 of the 139 receptions, 1,404 of the 1,876 receiving yards, and 16 of the 18 touchdowns.

For all intents and purposes, Kent State has one returning starter on the offensive line and one who was the third wide receiver. Of course, like I've written about with other teams, that's probably not a bad thing. Kent State was 133rd in scoring offense and 134th in yards per play out of 134 teams.

DEFENSE

The defense was beyond terrible. Clearly the offense didn't help much, but Kent State allowed nearly six yards per carry, seven yards per play, and finished dead last in scoring defense. Only Tulsa gave up more touchdowns. The secondary only mustered four interceptions and the defense has had just 30 sacks over the last two seasons. The offense has given up 84 in that span.

This is an atrocious team in the trenches and I'm not sure how that will improve this season. Most of the sacks and impact plays are gone and Kent State didn't have a ton of time to peruse the portal. It is sad how far this program has fallen and I don't know how that changes with what looks to be a temporary solution at head coach.

OUTLOOK

I'm racking my brain to remember the last time I saw a win total of 1.5 with a college football team. Kent State might be favored over Merrimack in the opener and that's probably it. The other decent spot for a win is at home against UMass, but even that's a stretch. There are just so many more teams with hope, optimism, and new head coaches and schemes that another 0-8 in league play would not shock me.

prediction

UNDER 1.5 WINS

MASSACHUSETTS
MINUTEMEN

Head Coach: Joe Harasymiak (1st)
2024 Record: 2-10 SU & 6-5-1 ATS, 7-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

7
OFFENSE: 3
DEFENSE: 4

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	TEMPLE	+2.8	26.5
9/6	BRYANT	-17	5.5
9/13	at Iowa	+35.2	53
9/27	at Missouri	+35.5	53.5
10/4	W MICHIGAN	+5.6	28.5
10/11	at Kent St	-2.9	15.5
10/18	BUFFALO	+11.1	34
10/25	at C Michigan	+9.9	28
11/4	at Akron	+6.2	25
11/12	N ILLINOIS	+8.7	31
11/18	at Ohio U	+20.1	38
11/25	BOWLING GREEN	+7.3	29.5

SOS
31.21
(#123 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
1.8/-0.4
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
60-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
200-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	20	114	38.8	128
YARDS PER POINT	16.8	117	10.4	134
PLAYS PER GAME	71.7	34		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:55	7		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	36.0%	98	46.9%	118
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	336.7	104	402.9	89
YARDS PER PLAY	4.7	120	6.4	116
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	41	14		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	160.2	65	212.3	122
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.9	83	5.6	131
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	27.9	94		
COMPLETION %	56.3%	111	59.7%	45
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	176.5	113	190.6	23
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.3	119	8.2	106
TURNOVERS	0.8	14	0.7	131

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

21.0
CONFERENCE: #12 of 13
NATIONAL: #135 of 136

You can't help but hum Mark Morrison's legendary classic "Return of the Mack" while thinking about UMass football this season, as they return to the MAC. They'll do so with a first-year coach in Joe Harasymiak, who takes over for interim Shane Montgomery, who was 0-2 in replacing Don Brown, who went 6-28. Alex Miller was 0-3 as the interim replacing Walt Bell's 2-23 record prior to Brown's hiring. That's a lot of losses and not many wins.

UMass joined the FBS ranks in 2012 as a member of the MAC and played a full FBS schedule in 2013. It was a short-lived romance, as the MAC and UMass broke up in 2015 because the school didn't want to become a full-fledged member. Apparently those two exes were still thinking about each other, as the Minutemen are in the MAC once again.

OFFENSE
Harasymiak has a couple of good options at QB, with Utah transfer Brandon Rose and Yale's 2024 starter Grant Jordan. It has been a while since UMass has had good QB play, though they did score over 20 PPG the last two seasons after scoring just 16.3 PPG in 2021 and 12.5 PPG in 2022. The team is replacing leading rushers and leading receivers, but a 2-10 team with 5.1 yards per play could probably benefit from a clean slate and new personnel.

Mike Bajakian has been tasked with setting up the offense. That doesn't sound all that inspiring given what Northwestern did on offense from 2020-23, but this is not the Big Ten. This is a rebuilt offense with a new scheme, so it will take some time. But, at least the bar is low.

DEFENSE
Harasymiak is a defensive guy, as he was most recently the DC at Rutgers and was a co-DC with Minnesota prior to that. The offense obviously wasn't good, but the defense was the worse of the two units, allowing over 35 PPG each of the last two seasons. Given that Brown's area of expertise was allegedly defense, there should be some inherent skepticism as to how this side of the ball progresses.

The Minutemen have allowed well over six yards per play every season for a long time now. They also create zero negative plays with a max of 18 sacks over the last seven seasons. It is worth noting that UMass only had 10 turnovers on offense and still had a negative TO margin. One player with more than 40 tackles is back, but again, "returning production" is an oxymoron here.

OUTLOOK
A new voice, a fresh start, and probably more of the same. That being said, the schedule isn't too daunting, as they have a win total with 3.5 and vig on the Over. Unfortunately, the Kent State and Akron games are on the road, though they could be a road favorite over the Zips and will undoubtedly be favored over the Flashes. I still don't see four wins in Year 1.

prediction

UNDER 3.5 WINS

MIAMI OHIO
REDHAWKS

Head Coach: Chuck Martin (12th)
2024 Record: 9-5 SU & 7-7 ATS, 6-7-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

5
OFFENSE: 0
DEFENSE: 5

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

35.5 CONFERENCE: #3 of 13
NATIONAL: #90 of 136

Chuck Martin's 12th season with Miami will be his first without Brett Gabbert, as the 31-year-old finally ran out of eligibility. Nah, but seriously, what an accomplishment nowadays to spend 12 seasons with the same program. For both Martin and Gabbert. And Martin's had a lot of good ones, too, as the 57-year-old has won two division titles outright, shared another, and tied for first in the conference this past season, its first without divisions.

Even though his overall record reads just 65-67, Martin is 51-32 in MAC games and has not had a losing season in conference since 2015. This program has been consistently competitive and Martin even has a 20-8 record overall and a 14-2 record in MAC play over the last two seasons. This season might represent his toughest one in about a decade, as he has an entire roster turnover.

OFFENSE
Dequan Finn is back in the MAC and will be asked to fill the shoes of Gabbert, who was the third QB in program history to throw for over 10,000 yards, joining Zac Dysert and Ben Roethlisberger. I feel a little bad about Gabbert catching strays, as he was a warrior for the RedHawks with 53 games over six seasons, including all 14 games last season for the first time since he was a freshman in 2019.

But, Gabbert also threw a career-high 11 interceptions last season and had his lowest completion rate in five seasons at 57.3%. Miami still found enough big plays to have 6.1 yards per play, but they only mustered 24.1 PPG. Arguably the bigger loss is 1,000-yard rusher Keyon Mozee. With Kenny Tracy back off a torn ACL and a Virginia Tech transfer, OC Pat Welsh will find a ball carrier. And if not, Finn can do it with nearly 2,000 rushing yards to his name.

By the way, while I'm playfully trashing Gabbert, guess when Finn's first season of college football was? Yep. 2019.

DEFENSE
Martin's teams are always good on defense and that will be the focal point as the offense starts from the ground up. The losses are not nearly as penal on paper for this unit, especially with top defensive back Silas Waters and his 12 pass breakups back. All-time leading tackler Matt Salopek is a huge loss as the captain and leader of the defense, but there are plenty of upperclassmen for Martin to rely on.

Something to watch with Miami is that they've been outstanding on special teams the last three seasons, but have a new special teams coordinator in Johnny Aylward, who was a graduate assistant for the RedHawks a few years ago.

OUTLOOK
The 24-year-old Finn can probably whip this offense into shape and we know Martin will do that with the defense. The schedule is quite difficult by MAC standards and the RedHawks will go 1-3 in non-conference play. Can they go 6-2 in conference? I don't think so, but it's hard to count Martin out.

schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	at Wisconsin	+16.1	49.5
9/6	at Rutgers	+14.6	48
9/20	UNLV	+5.9	43.5
9/27	LINDENWOOD	-26.8	11.5
10/4	at N Illinois	-2.8	31
10/11	at Akron	-8.8	25
10/18	E MICHIGAN	-11	27
10/25	W MICHIGAN	-9.8	28.5
11/4	at Ohio U	+5.1	38
11/12	TOLEDO	+1.9	40
11/19	at Buffalo	+0.8	34
11/29	BALL ST	-17.5	21

SOS
32.81
(#114 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+700

MAKE PLAYOFF
40-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	24.1	87	18.8	12
YARDS PER POINT	14.7	76	17.6	8
PLAYS PER GAME	59.9	130		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:04	91		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	33.7%	118	42.4%	90
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	352.7	94	331.1	25
YARDS PER PLAY	5.9	44	4.7	16
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	29.5	118		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	135.3	85	137.6	40
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.6	45	3.9	44
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.5	87		
COMPLETION %	56.4%	110	57.8%	26
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	217.4	74	193.5	30
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.6	45	5.8	2
TURNOVERS	1.3	48	1.6	36

prediction

UNDER 6.5 WINS

NORTHERN ILLINOIS
HUSKIES

Head Coach: Thomas Hammock (7th)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 6-6-1 ATS, 6-5-2 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

5
OFFENSE: 2
DEFENSE: 3

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	HOLY CROSS	-13.2	19
9/5	at Maryland	+12.9	42
9/20	at Mississippi St	+14.8	44
9/27	SAN DIEGO ST	-2	30.5
10/4	MIAMI OHIO	+2.8	35.5
10/11	at E Michigan	-2.2	27
10/18	at Ohio U	+9.2	38
10/25	BALL ST	-12.1	21
11/5	at Toledo	+11.2	40
11/12	at Massachusetts	-8.7	21
11/18	W MICHIGAN	-4.4	28.5
11/28	KENT ST	-17.8	15.5

SOS
30.21
(#127 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
1.8/0.5
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
12-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
60-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	22.1	102	18.8	13
YARDS PER POINT	16.1	103	15.1	45
PLAYS PER GAME	73.3	18		
TIME OF POSSESSION	33:30	4		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	40.0%	64	26.5%	1
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	355.3	88	283.5	3
YARDS PER PLAY	4.8	110	4.5	6
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	43.4	7		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	194.8	21	113.7	15
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.5	55	3.6	19
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.4	90		
COMPLETION %	56.6%	108	53.4%	5
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	160.5	122	169.8	5
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	5.6	131	5.9	6
TURNOVERS	1.3	50	1.2	96

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

31.0
CONFERENCE: #5 of 13
NATIONAL: #105 of 136

Two teams beat Notre Dame last season. One was Ohio State to win the National Championship. The other was Northern Illinois in one of the most surprising results of the season. The victory actually pushed the Huskies into the Top 25, which was very short-lived as they lost to Buffalo in their next game. In the end, NIU was 8-5, with four of their five losses by seven points or less. Only one of their wins, the Notre Dame victory, would be defined as a close game.

Thomas Hammock enters his seventh season and has picked up some really impressive wins over the last three seasons with Notre Dame, Boston College, and Georgia Tech. Any Power Four win for a program like this gets some attention, hopefully from the media, but especially from recruits and potential recruits. This is a totally rebuilt roster for 2025 with two new coordinators.

OFFENSE
New OC Quinn Sanders was the head coach of the Charleston Golden Eagles in the Mountain East Conference the last three seasons and he's taking a big leap here to be the OC and QB Coach of a FBS team. But, that said, the hire of the 36-year-old is an outside-the-box move and I'm always in favor of being more creative. It also means that the Huskies are going to flip to more of a spread offense look.

It's good that Hammock saw the need for change. The defense carried NIU last season by allowing just 18.5 points per game. The offense had its lowest yards per play output in a non-COVID season since 2019 and only mustered 24.5 PPG, lower than even 2020 when the team was 0-6. With the top four wide receivers, starting QB Ethan Hampton, and the top two rushers gone, it's a good time to try a new scheme, led by Josh Holst, who said the offense is similar to what he ran in high school.

DEFENSE
The new-look offense may have a negative impact on the defensive numbers. NIU allowed just 4.7 yards per play last season, their first season under 5 YPP since 2018. The sacks increased from 23 to 36 and the run defense was a lot stouter. Well, now there's a new DC in Rob Harley and not a single player with at least 40 tackles returns. Old DC Nick Benedetto was hired at Fresno State, who, ironically, NIU beat in the Potato Bowl.

The one area where the NIU defense failed was forcing turnovers and Harley, a former GA under Mark Dantonio and assistant under Pat Narduzzi, may have a much more aggressive approach. The Huskies had 14 takeaways in 13 games last season and finished with a negative turnover margin for the fifth time in six seasons.

OUTLOOK
The average NIU game had 43 points last season, but with more tempo coming on offense and more aggression on defense, their games might be good Over bets early on. This is basically a total program overhaul, so the range of outcomes is pretty wide. They also play most of the MAC's best, but I like the hires a lot. I think this is a low-key good team.

OVER 6.5 WINS

OHIO
BOBCATS

Head Coach: Brian Smith (1st)
2024 Record: 11-3 SU & 9-5 ATS, 6-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

10
OFFENSE: 7 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 3

SOS
33.17
(#109 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+320

MAKE PLAYOFF
30-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	29.9	43	19.1	14
YARDS PER POINT	13.8	55	16.4	14
PLAYS PER GAME	66.9	85		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:50	9		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	47.2%	10	39.2%	65
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	412.2	36	313.2	11
YARDS PER PLAY	6.2	22	4.9	23
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	40.5	19		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	221.5	10	94.8	5
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.5	9	3.1	9
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	25	117		
COMPLETION %	62.5%	49	61.9%	75
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	190.8	103	218.3	59
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.6	44	7	50
TURNOVERS	1.4	62	1.5	45

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

38.0 CONFERENCE: #2 of 13
NATIONAL: #82 of 136

Continuity doesn't always breed success, but it certainly has at Ohio. The Bobcats do lose head coach Tim Albin, as he took the drive down I-77 to Charlotte, but he was nice enough to leave behind OC Brian Smith, who was the interim head coach in Ohio's Cure Bowl win over Jacksonville State. Smith's promotion to full-time head coach means it should be business as usual in Athens and his side of the ball features a lot of familiar faces.

Albin also left behind defensive coordinator John Hauser, who was hired prior to the 2024 season. This has been one of the nation's top defenses in each of the last two seasons. The Bobcats, who won the MAC Title for the first time since 1968 last season, enter this season with high hopes again and a very realistic chance at a repeat.

OFFENSE
Sticking with that theme of continuity, Smith will still have his fingerprints all over the offense, but Scott Isphording, who has been an assistant with the Bobcats for over a decade, now has the OC title. Obviously those moves meant something to the players, as QB Parker Navarro stuck around, four of the five top pass catchers are back, and 2022-23 starting running back Sieh Bangura returned after a season at Minnesota.

The loss of Anthony Tyus, who ran for over 1,200 miles, is less of a loss with Bangura back and pretty fresh after not really seeing the field much at Minnesota. Top WR Coleman Owen did have 38 more receptions and nearly 800 more yards than anybody else, but that's the only concerning area for the offense. Navarro threw for 2,423 and ran for 1,054 with 31 total touchdowns, so he'll find playmakers or make plays himself.

DEFENSE
The Ohio defense has allowed 15.8 and 18.1 PPG, respectively, over the last two seasons and has allowed fewer than five yards per play in each of them. Last year's defense was 21st in the nation in YPP and 12th in scoring defense. While a lot of that talent is gone, the Bobcats do return their top two guys in tackles for loss and their top corner by interceptions.

Hauser actually made the move from rival Miami of Ohio to come to Ohio, so he's well-versed in the MAC. That being said, Ohio lost 30-20 to Miami in the regular season before getting retribution in a big way with a 38-3 drubbing in the MAC Title Game. The Bobcats only allowed 14 PPG in conference action, so they have time to come together during a tough non-conference portion to rack up wins when it really matters.

OUTLOOK
Rutgers, West Virginia, and Ohio State is a hell of a way to start the season, but then things soften up greatly. Ohio avoids Toledo, but does go on the road to Buffalo, and also doesn't get the luxury of playing Kent State or Akron. From the looks of it, they'll have to go 7-1 or better in conference play to get Over this number. I can't see it, but obviously +280 to win the MAC is live.

prediction

UNDER 7.5 WINS

TOLEDO
ROCKETS

Head Coach: Jason Candle (10th)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 6-7 ATS, 8-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

13 OFFENSE: 8 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 5

SOS
28.08
(#135 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+230

MAKE PLAYOFF
18-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	26.6	68	24.3	48
YARDS PER POINT	13.7	54	15	48
PLAYS PER GAME	69.8	57		
TIME OF POSSESSION	26:45	127		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	33.9%	117	39.1%	62
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	364	84	365.4	55
YARDS PER PLAY	5.2	92	4.8	18
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	33.1	98		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	113.1	110	153.6	66
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.4	115	3.7	25
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.3	29		
COMPLETION %	60.3%	74	57.6%	21
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	250.9	40	211.8	46
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.1	76	6.4	22
TURNOVERS	1.6	83	1.4	58

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

40.0 CONFERENCE: #1 of 13
NATIONAL: #75 of 136

Led by another tenured coach in this conference in Jason Candle, Toledo has a great shot at returning to form. Last year's 8-5 record was hardly disappointing, including a thrilling six-overtime victory against a Power Four opponent in Pitt at the GameAbove Bowl. However, Toledo was just 4-4 in MAC play, the first time since 2019 that they failed to finish with a winning record. Given that the Rockets were 8-1 against MAC foes in 2023, with the lone loss coming in the MAC Title Game, a .500 record was a bit of a surprise.

There are some notable losses on both sides of the ball for the Rockets, but they're in much better shape than most of the other teams in the MAC, including those who are lined among the favorites.

OFFENSE
A big reason why is because QB Tucker Gleason is back after posting a 24/8 TD/INT ratio with over 2,800 yards passing. Backup John Alan Richter is back as well, so the Rockets are probably the deepest at the position in the conference. They also brought in a really interesting RB transfer in Chip Trayanum, who is best-known for scoring the goal-line touchdown for Ohio State against Notre Dame back in 2023. Trayanum was at Arizona State last season and should be the feature back for a Toledo team that had just 3.4 yards per carry.

That was a drop of nearly two yards per carry for the Rockets, so Candle, who calls the plays for Toledo, seems to be placing a stronger emphasis on running the rock. Top WR Jerjuan Newton is gone, but Junior Vandeross had 85 catches, so they're fine there and also on the offensive line.

DEFENSE
The offense only mustered 21 PPG in conference action. The defense only allowed 23 PPG, so right on par with the season as a whole. It was another strong season for Vince Kehres' defense, as the Mount Union legend has now had four straight defenses with 5.0 YPP or fewer allowed. Three of the top four tacklers are gone, including the top two guys, but Kehres will put together a good unit.

Unlike last season, when Toledo had to replace Quinyon Mitchell, they aren't replacing an NFL draft pick this season. They have not allowed more than 362 yards per game since 2019.

OUTLOOK
Toledo has no reason to come up short this season. As consistently solid as this team has been, though, the 45-year-old Candle only has two MAC titles in his nine seasons. They are favored to make it three this season. They avoid Ohio and Buffalo, but do go to Miami late in the year. Still, this should be the class of the conference and a conference where they can stack wins.

prediction

OVER 8.5 WINS

WESTERN MICHIGAN
BRONCOS

Head Coach: Lance Taylor (3rd)
2024 Record: 6-8 SU & 5-9 ATS, 7-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

7
OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 3

SOS
33.19
(#108 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.4/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
16-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
200-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

2024 stats

| | OFFENSE | | DEFENSE | |
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	26.4	69	31.3	101
YARDS PER POINT	13	31	13.7	86
PLAYS PER GAME	61.8	126		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:50	74		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	34.8%	108	44.7%	107
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	344.4	100	428.4	108
YARDS PER PLAY	5.6	66	6.7	126
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.8	57		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	167.4	50	196.9	112
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.5	47	5.2	114
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	23.1	126		
COMPLETION %	71.1%	8	66.1%	114
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	177	112	231.5	79
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.7	42	9.1	130
TURNOVERS	1	24	1.8	20

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

28.5 CONFERENCE: #7 of 13
NATIONAL: #116 of 136

A little bit of a spoiler alert here, but it seems like one of the most underrated teams in the MAC resides in Kalamazoo. Western Michigan hired Lance Taylor prior to the 2023 season. Taylor, who was the OC at Louisville and a position coach at Notre Dame, has taken this offense from 19.0 PPG right before he started up to 23.7 PPG in Year 1 and 28.9 PPG in Year 2. It was the defense that fell off last season, but this is likely to be a good offensive team again.

DC Scott Power took an assistant job with Wisconsin and Taylor went back to his Notre Dame roots to pull Chris O'Leary away from the LA Chargers. O'Leary was on Notre Dame's staff with Taylor and spent last season coaching safeties in the NFL. I think this is the dark horse team that could make a run in the MAC.

OFFENSE
Hayden Wolff is gone, but truth be told, an 18/8 TD/INT ratio is replaceable, even if he did complete two-thirds of his passes. Taylor went the JUCO route and grabbed Brady Jones from Riverside C.C. in California. I guess it's fair to wonder how he will adapt to the cold weather of Michigan as the season goes along, but he threw for 4,456 yards with a 44/8 TD/INT ratio.

Taylor and OC Walt Bell don't plan to have a prolific passing offense, as they were just 115th in the nation in pass attempts last season. But, Jones probably gives them a higher-upside arm and Jalen Buckley and Cole Cabana, originally at Michigan, will timeshare in the backfield. I think this offense has the potential to be extremely good after improving by a full yard per play year over year.

DEFENSE
If this side of the ball improves, that will be the key for Western Michigan. They allowed 31.3 PPG and 6.4 yards per play despite a lot of returning starters and production. I really liked the Power hire, but with him gone, O'Leary just might be an upgrade. There isn't a lot of returning production this season, as only two of the team's top tacklers are back. But, that's probably not a bad thing with the overall numbers.

Plus, this was Taylor's third recruiting cycle, both for incoming freshmen and transfers, so he has to have more of the roster that he wants than the holdovers from Tim Lester. It all depends on how well Taylor did in the portal. While the freshmen class wasn't great, 247 Sports said WMU had the second-best transfer class.

OUTLOOK
This is my favorite win total in the MAC. I like Over 5.5 Wins and love the plus-money price. The Broncos can absolutely beat their two in-state rivals and get Toledo and Ohio at home. The non-conference is tricky with two Big Ten teams, but I believe they're live against North Texas and should beat Rhode Island.

prediction

OVER 5.5 WINS

MOUNTAIN WEST
preview

Coverage by
Jonathan Von Tobel

Boise State has ruled over the Mountain West for a long time, and in its final year in the conference the program is primed to go out with a third consecutive title. Despite the Broncos' success over the last two years the conference has boasted some quality programs to push them.

That does not seem to be the case this season.

UNLV – which earned berths in the conference championship game each of the last two seasons – is undergoing a complete overhaul. Barry Odom left in the offseason for Purdue, and Dan Mullen takes over a roster which has just five returning starters.

San José State surprised many last season, and the market expectation is that the Spartans will build on that success this season. However, Ken Niumatalolo's squad does not measure up to Boise State from a power rating perspective.

There are some other programs which could climb the standings in the Mountain West.

Air Force brings back an experienced offense in 2025. Hawaii has a burgeoning young quarterback in Micah Alejado who could push the Rainbow Warriors to new heights.

There are new faces in the conference as well.

Former North Dakota State head coach Matt Entz takes over at Fresno State. Jason Eck – former Idaho head coach – is now in charge in Albuquerque. New Mexico's former head coach – Bronco Mendenhall – made the leap to Utah State in the offseason.

The last two seasons for the Mountain West were very strong. The conference boasted some strong teams, and it had quality depth with a number of programs which could realistically vie for a title. This year the conference is down on paper, and it would seem the odds-on favorite – Boise State – is primed to win its third consecutive title on the way out the door to the Pac-12.

2025 projected standings

TEAM	2024 SM PR	HOME FA	ROAD FA	SS (RANK)	ALL PRJW'S	ALL PRJL'S	CONF PRJW'S	CONF PRJL'S	DRAFTKINGS O/U
BOISE ST	51	2.9	0.3	35.43 (83)	9.9	2.1	7.2	0.8	9.5
UNLV	43.5	2.8	0.6	32.68 (115)	8.9	3.1	6.0	2.0	8.5
SAN JOSE ST	37.5	2.5	0.1	34.7 (95)	7.4	4.6	5.3	2.7	7.5
FRESNO ST	37.5	2.7	0	33.87 (104)	6.7	5.3	4.7	3.3	6.5
COLORADO ST	35.5	2.1	0	34.85 (91)	5.9	6.1	3.8	4.2	6.5
AIR FORCE	35	2.6	0	35.23 (85)	5.7	6.3	3.8	4.2	5.5
WYOMING	34	2.6	-0.4	35.23 (84)	5.6	6.4	3.7	4.3	5.5
HAWAII	33	2.9	-0.6	33.87 (105)	5.7	6.3	3.5	4.5	6.5
SAN DIEGO ST	30.5	2.3	0.3	33.85 (106)	4.9	7.1	3.0	5.0	4.5
UTAH ST	29.5	2.4	-0.1	37.07 (73)	4.2	7.8	2.6	5.4	4.5
NEW MEXICO	27.5	2	-0.4	36.83 (75)	3.9	8.1	2.3	5.7	3.5
NEVADA	27	2.2	0.1	36.65 (76)	3.7	8.3	2.1	5.9	3.5

AIR FORCE
FALCONS

Head Coach: Troy Calhoun (19th)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 5-7 ATS, 5-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

13 OFFENSE: 8
       DEFENSE: 5

SOS
35.23
(#85 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/0
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
16-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
45-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	18.7	121	24.8	55
YARDS PER POINT	17.1	122	14.4	75
PLAYS PER GAME	69	68		
TIME OF POSSESSION	33:54	2		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	42.5%	39	39.2%	64
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	320.7	116	356.3	47
YARDS PER PLAY	4.6	123	6.1	101
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	56.2	1		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	229.3	8	158.5	74
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.1	80	4.7	93
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	11.3	133		
COMPLETION %	45.2%	133	65.6%	109
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	91.5	133	197.7	35
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.1	28	8.4	112
TURNOVERS	1.4	55	0.8	121

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
35.0 CONFERENCE: #6 of 12
        NATIONAL: #97 of 136

Air Force posted its worst record since 2018 last season, but the season ended on a high note. The Falcons won their last four games and covered their last five on the way to a 5-7 record. Heading into 2025 Troy Calhoun has an experienced group and a chance to get back to the top of the Mountain West.

OFFENSE
The offensive numbers for the season were poor for Air Force last season. It averaged only 4.0 yards per carry and 229.3 yards per game. The offense really came around over the last four weeks of the season. In those contests they averaged 302 yards and 29.3 points per game and 4.6 yards per rush. Eight starters are back this season and will look to build on that strong finish.

Four of the top five rushers are back for 2025. Leading the way is Dylan Carson who ran for 600 yards and five touchdowns on 4.3 yards per carry. Like the Falcons as a whole, Carson finished strong as well with 447 of his rushing yards coming over the last four contests. Three starters are back on the offensive line in front of him, so the momentum from last season should carry over to this year.

The question for this unit comes at quarterback. Quentin Hayes and John Busha both started for the Falcons last season, but it was Hayes who led the team in the second half of the campaign. Both depart and the expected starter is Josh Johnson. The junior dropped back 19 times and had 15 rush attempts in 2024 so the transition to a new quarterback should be smooth.

DEFENSE
The turnaround for the Falcons last season took place on defense as well, but fewer players are back from that unit than on offense. Only five starters return, but that might not be as damaging. Air Force had one of its worst defensive seasons in a decade last year. Opponents averaged 4.6 yards per carry and 5.9 yards per play. The 23.3 points per game allowed were the most since 2018.

The team's top six tacklers are all gone. Three starters from the secondary departed in the offseason as well. But, Calhoun has always done a great job on this end, no matter the returning production. The Falcons also have quite a bit of returning production up front on the defensive line. Three defensive linemen started at least six games last season. This defense should be much better than what it was.

OUTLOOK
The needle is definitely pointing up for Air Force. The Falcons benefit from a great schedule as well. They have no power opponents on the docket and its toughest road trips in conference are to UNLV and San Jose State. Not only is Air Force a candidate to go over its win total, but there is value in its price to win the Mountain West.

prediction
OVER 5.5 WINS

BOISE STATE
BRONCOS

Head Coach: Spencer Danielson (3rd)
2024 Record: 12-2 SU & 7-6-1 ATS, 7-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

14
OFFENSE: 7 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 7

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	at South Florida	-7.9	41
9/5	E WASHINGTON	-29.8	24.5
9/20	at Air Force	-13.7	35
9/27	APPALACHIAN ST	-21.3	33
10/4	at Notre Dame	+17.3	65.5
10/11	NEW MEXICO	-26.8	27.5
10/18	UNLV	-9.8	43.5
10/24	at Nevada	-22.1	27
11/1	FRESNO ST	-16.4	37.5
11/15	at San Diego St	-18.5	30.5
11/22	COLORADO ST	-18.4	35.5
11/28	at Utah St	-19.4	29.5

SOS
35.43
(#83 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.9/0.3
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
-140

MAKE PLAYOFF
+190

CFP CHAMPION
250-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	35.8	7	23.2	37
YARDS PER POINT	12.7	21	16	21
PLAYS PER GAME	70.6	48		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:03	20		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	48.0%	9	37.7%	47
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	455	8	370.5	59
YARDS PER PLAY	6.4	8	5.4	58
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	39.8	25		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	232.5	6	120.5	27
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.8	3	3.8	30
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	29.8	73		
COMPLETION %	62.3%	51	60.3%	59
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	222.5	67	250	107
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.5	55	7.5	79
TURNOVERS	0.8	18	1.2	92

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

51.0 CONFERENCE: #1 of 12
NATIONAL: #37 of 136

Boise State met the high expectations set for it last season with 12 wins and a berth in the College Football Playoff. The Broncos fell short of a national championship, but expectations are sky-high as usual in Boise for 2025 despite the loss of Doak Walker winner Ashton Jeanty.

OFFENSE

Boise State went to the transfer portal in order to fill the void at running back. Malik Sherrod transferred in from Fresno State and he brings with him a solid resume. In 2023 Sherrod ran for 966 yards and nine touchdowns. His 2024 season was cut short due to injury. He is a physical runner who averaged 3.51 yards per carry after contact in his best season. No one can replace a running back like Jeanty, but Sherrod is a good option to lean on.

The loss of Jeanty also means quarterback Maddux Madsen will have more on his shoulders. The redshirt sophomore completed 62.4% of his passes for 3,014 yards and tossed 23 touchdowns to six interceptions last season. However, his turnover-worthy play rate (4.3%) was very high. If those plays turn into actual turnovers bettors could see Madsen regress.

Still, this should be an effective offense once again. The offensive line remains mostly intact – save for the loss of guard Ben Dooley – and two of the team's top three receivers from last season return.

DEFENSE

Seven starters are back from last year on defense. Among those returning are defensive lineman Jayden Virgin-Morgan and linebacker Marco Notarainni, both of whom were named to the All-Mountain West First Team. Boise State's defense was elite against the run in 2024 – it allowed 3.8 yards per carry – and it should be able to put up similar production this season with this duo back.

The Broncos' secondary is the biggest question entering the season, as it was its biggest issue at times last season. Opponents completed 60.5% of their passes against Boise State and threw 24 touchdowns to just seven interceptions. Most of that group returns this season. There is something to be said for continuity, but if this group struggles once again it could be what holds the Broncos from achieving their ultimate goal.

OUTLOOK

Boise State is deserving of its status as an odds-on favorite to win the Mountain West. Its schedule also presents few challenges in conference play. One could argue -130 is a cheap price to pay for this team to win the Mountain West, especially if some of the programs near the top regress. This should be another strong season for the Broncos.

prediction

OVER 9.5 WINS

COLORADO STATE
RAMS

Head Coach: Jay Norvell (4th)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 7-5-1 ATS, 6-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

6 OFFENSE: 4 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 2

schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	at Washington	+18.8	51.5
9/6	N COLORADO	-37.7	0.5
9/20	TX-SAN ANTONIO	+3.9	41.5
9/27	WASHINGTON ST	-2.2	35
10/3	at San Diego St	-2.7	30.5
10/10	FRESNO ST	-0.1	37.5
10/18	HAWAII	-5.2	33
10/25	at Wyoming	+1.1	34
11/8	UNLV	+6.5	43.5
11/15	at New Mexico	-6	27.5
11/22	at Boise St	+18.4	51
11/28	AIR FORCE	-2.6	35

SOS
34.85
(#91 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.1/0
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
16-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
45-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	23.3	95	26.5	68
YARDS PER POINT	16.5	111	15.2	38
PLAYS PER GAME	66.6	87		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:11	33		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	34.9%	107	39.3%	66
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	384.4	58	402.6	87
YARDS PER PLAY	5.8	47	5.8	82
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.3	77		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	163.5	58	164.3	84
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.6	44	4.7	92
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.3	67		
COMPLETION %	60.1%	78	61.7%	73
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	220.9	69	238.3	93
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.3	65	7.1	51
TURNOVERS	1.6	83	1.8	20

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

35.5 CONFERENCE: #5 of 12
NATIONAL: #89 of 136

Colorado State is coming off its best season in the Jay Norvell era. The Rams won eight games and fell just a game short of a berth in the Mountain West Championship. Only six starters are back for Norvell and the schedule is much more difficult this time around.

OFFENSE
Brayden Fowler-Nicolosi returns for his fourth season, his third as the starting quarterback for Colorado State. In two seasons as a full time starter Fowler-Nicolosi has completed 61.4% of his passes, thrown 36 touchdowns to 25 interceptions and 7.4 yards per attempt. The redshirt junior is hardly perfect though. His career 4.2% turnover-worthy play rate is below average, and there are rumblings coming out of Fort Collins that Akron transfer Tahj Bullock might be allowed to push him in camp for the job.

The biggest turnover on the roster for this offense comes at wide receiver. Fowler-Nicolosi's top three receivers from 2024 are gone. Norvell did lessen the blow by landing former four-star recruit and Ohio State transfer Kojo Antwi in the portal. With the loss of production and the tenuous hold Fowler-Nicolosi has on his job this should be a lesser passing attack in 2025.

Colorado State's running game should be in good hands despite the loss of Avery Morrow (1,046 yards, 5.5 yards per carry). Justin Marshall ran for 777 yards and averaged 4.8 yards per carry in 2024. He is back, as is Jalen Dupree who showed some explosiveness in averaging 6.1 yards per attempt. Only two starters are back on the offensive line, but Marshall and Dupree are a very solid tandem.

DEFENSE
Colorado State only brings two starters back from last season, but that might be a blessing in disguise. While the Rams only allowed 25.8 points per game they allowed 4.5 yards per carry and 5.8 yards per play. The defense also lacked a real pass rush and totaled only 17 sacks. So while there might be massive turnover for the unit this group can greatly improve.

Norvell brought in a litany of transfers for his defense, and he has a new defensive coordinator in Tyson Summers who held the same position here in 2014. Summers' defenses have a knack for being opportunistic. At Western Kentucky his defense had a total of 78 takeaways in three seasons. Bettors should look for the Rams to improve in that category under Summers this season.

OUTLOOK
Colorado State has improved its record each season under Norvell, but this is likely the season in which that trend ends. There are questions about the starting quarterback and massive roster turnover. The Rams also have a much more difficult schedule. Six of their conference opponents last season finished with a losing record. This year, four of their Mountain West foes have win totals of at least 6.5 and they must face ascending programs like Air Force and Fresno State.

prediction
UNDER 6.5 WINS

FRESNO STATE
BULLDOGS

Head Coach: Matt Entz (1st)
2024 Record: 6-7 SU & 6-6-1 ATS, 5-7-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

8 OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 4

SOS
33.87
(#104 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/0
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+900

MAKE PLAYOFF
30-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	24.4	85	24.4	50
YARDS PER POINT	13.4	45	14.2	77
PLAYS PER GAME	63.5	120		
TIME OF POSSESSION	26:54	125		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	38.2%	81	35.6%	33
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	326.3	112	346.2	38
YARDS PER PLAY	5.1	95	4.7	11
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.2	127		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	93.5	126	141.7	47
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.3	119	3.8	28
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	33.1	41		
COMPLETION %	69.5%	13	55.0%	7
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	232.8	54	204.5	41
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7	81	5.9	3
TURNOVERS	1.2	38	1.4	58

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
37.5 CONFERENCE: #4 of 12
NATIONAL: #86 of 136

Former North Dakota State head coach returns to the role after serving as USC's linebacker coach last season. In five years he led the Bison to a 60-11 record and two FCS national championships. Entz is hoping to reestablish a winning culture for a stalwart program in the Mountain West coming off its first losing season since 2019.

OFFENSE
Elijah Gilliam ran for 466 yards and eight touchdowns last season, both of which led the team, but the excitement is about sophomore Bryson Donelson. Donelson averaged 6.0 yards per carry and ran for 462 yards last season. He had 16 runs of 10+ yards and six runs of 15+ yards. The Bulldogs will likely lean heavily on this backfield throughout the season.

Mikey Keene transferred to Michigan in the offseason, so Entz hit the portal and brought in EJ Warner from Rice. Warner – former NFL quarterback Kurt Warner's son – has been average throughout his college career. He's completed just 59.9% of his passes, owns a 1.56 touchdown-to-interception ratio and has committed a turnover-worthy play on 4.3% of his pass attempts. Warner won't be asked to do much, but this is a clear downgrade for the Bulldogs, even after a disappointing season from Keene.

It's a new-look receiver room for the Bulldogs as well and only two starters are back along the offensive line. In a new offensive system it isn't the worst thing in the world to have turnover, but the passing game could clearly lack some power in 2025.

DEFENSE
Entz has a defensive background – he served as NDSU's defensive coordinator for five seasons prior to taking over as head coach – so this group should have a higher floor despite the roster turnover.

The secondary figures to be the Bulldogs' strength this season. Al'zillion Hamilton is Fresno State's highest graded returning defensive starter. The senior cornerback allowed just 10.7 yards per reception, intercepted two passes and broke up eight last season. He was named to the preseason All-Mountain West First Team. The secondary overall has lost quite a bit, but Hamilton should make it a strength.

Elsewhere there are some positions being rebuilt. The Bulldogs' top three tacklers from last season are all gone. In fact, Hamilton is the leading returning tackler. Three starters are gone from the defensive line and the leading tackler among the linebackers had just 16 last season. Entz has added quite a few bodies up front from the portal, but there is a high probability this group slips from its production against the run last season (3.8 yards per carry).

OUTLOOK
Entz has a history of winning at the FCS level, so there is reason to be hopeful about the future of Fresno State. The Bulldogs avoid UNLV on the schedule, but must go to Boise and San Jose. They also draw three opponents coming off a bye – although Fresno State is coming off a bye itself in two of those contests. The Bulldogs will run the ball and play defense this season, and with a manageable schedule that could lead to a better season than the market expects.

prediction
OVER 6.5 WINS

HAWAII
RAINBOW WARRIORS

Head Coach: Timmy Chang (4th)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 6-5-1 ATS, 5-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

15 OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 9

SOS
33.87
(#105 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.9/-0.6
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
20-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
60-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	19.7	116	14	82
YARDS PER POINT	17.9	127		
PLAYS PER GAME	73.4	17		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:25	49	41.3%	81
3RD DOWN CONV. %	34.8%	111	406.4	93
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	353.1	91	5.8	84
YARDS PER PLAY	4.8	114		
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	29	123	181.2	100
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	89.5	128	4.9	102
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.1	127		
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	40.2	9	66.3%	117
COMPLETION %	58.0%	101	225.2	69
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	263.6	26	7.3	65
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.6	107	0.9	119
TURNOVERS	1.7	103		

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

33.0 CONFERENCE: #8 of 12
NATIONAL: #102 of 136

Timmy Chang has yet to put together a winning season at his alma mater, but the program is improving. The former Hawaii quarterback has a roster this season loaded with experience this year, and he's got a good chance at posting his first winning record as head coach in 2025.

OFFENSE

Hawaii's offensive production has improved each season under Chang. Six starters are back for this unit in 2025 and despite the loss of quarterback Brayden Schager the trend of improvement could continue.

Micah Alejado is expected to step in under center for the Rainbow Warriors this season. Alejado appeared in four games last season and started the finale against New Mexico. The Las Vegas native was impressive in his limited time on the field. He completed 70.0% of his passes on 82 dropbacks, threw six touchdowns and no interceptions. Alejado showed an ability to stretch the field as well. On 13 attempts of 20+ yards, he completed seven passes for 239 yards and two touchdowns.

Hawaii's skill positions are in very good shape as well. The top two receivers from last season – Nick Cenacle and Pofele Ashlock – are back with the program. So too is leading rusher Landon Sims and three starters are back along the offensive line. If Alejado pans out this could be one of the most dangerous offenses in the Mountain West.

DEFENSE

The most experienced unit for Hawaii is its defense. Nine starters are back from a group that allowed the fewest yards per play since 2020 (5.7). The top five tacklers are back and this unit should be improved due to the continuity.

That improvement needs to happen. As great as it is to have returning production, this defense was very average last year. It allowed 4.7 yards per carry and forced just 10 turnovers all year long. The 27 sacks it generated are tied for the most since 2018, but this is a team that has not had more than 30 sacks in a season since 2018.

Chang did bring in Dennis Thurman to run the defense this season. Thurman last held the position at Jackson State from 2020-2022 and was last with Colorado as its Director of Quality Control. This group probably won't be among the best in the Mountain West, but if Thurman can get them closer to average it will be a big win.

OUTLOOK

Alejado looks like he has some real potential and he has a great set of weapons to work with. The Rainbow Warriors avoid Boise State on the schedule this season as well. They have challenging trips to Air Force and UNLV on the schedule, but if the expected improvement takes place this is a team with upward mobility in the Mountain West.

prediction

OVER 6.5 WINS

NEVADA
WOLF PACK

Head Coach: Jeff Choate (2nd)
2024 Record: 3-10 SU & 6-6-1 ATS, 6-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

6 OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 2

SOS
36.65
(#76 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.2/0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
150-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	20.9	111	29.8	90
YARDS PER POINT	17.4	124	13.2	96
PLAYS PER GAME	65.4	100		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:51	41		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	41.7%	50	52.6%	134
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	362.9	85	395.2	83
YARDS PER PLAY	5.5	67	6	94
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.8	86		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	150.4	77	194.8	109
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.3	68	5.1	108
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.5	87		
COMPLETION %	67.0%	17	59.6%	44
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	212.5	82	200.3	37
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.5	56	7.6	81
TURNOVERS	1.2	38	1	108

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

27.0 CONFERENCE: #12 of 12
NATIONAL: #121 of 136

One of the most impressive coaching jobs done in the Mountain West last year was in Reno. Nevada only won three games, but it was a scrappy group that pushed a playoff team to the brink and pulled off an outright upset as an 8-point underdog. Jeff Choate must deal with roster turnover once again, but he is a solid coach that can get his group to play.

OFFENSE
Brandon Lewis had a strong season for the Wolf Pack in 2024 and that led to him transferring to Memphis. In steps Chubba Purdy who started two games for Nebraska in 2023. Purdy was on the roster for Nevada last season and was actually the expected starter in camp, but injury derailed his season. Like Lewis – who led the team in rushing last season – Purdy has some dual-threat nature to his game as well. There shouldn't be much of a dropoff at quarterback despite the transition.

The top two receivers from 2024 depart, but the third and fourth-leading receivers are back. The most productive of the two is Marcus Bellon, who was tied for second in touchdowns (4) and led the team in reception rate (86.7%). Jordan Brown played in 13 games for Texas Tech last season and joined the position group this year.

How well Nevada runs the ball is the biggest concern. Choate has made it known this will be the team's identity. The top three running backs from last season are gone. There is a Utah State transfer in the group, but it's unknown who will grab the job at this point. Whoever it is will run behind a line bringing back just two starters.

DEFENSE
Choate's specialty is defense, but this is the least experienced unit. Only two starters are back from a defense which made a 4.6-point improvement in scoring defense. Their top three tacklers and six of the top seven are all gone. The former Texas defensive coordinator has some magic to work here.

The front seven does have some good pieces. Middle linebacker Stone Combs played in 13 games, started four and was third on the team in tackles. Choate also brought in Nahji Logan and DJ Warnell to the linebacking corps. The duo played four games each at Indiana in 2024. Defensive tackle Nelson Ropati is a decent interior pass-rusher who made four starts last year for Nevada.

OUTLOOK
The Wolf Pack draws a challenging schedule this season. It faces Boise State, UNLV, San José State, Fresno State and San Diego State. Most of those programs make the trip to Reno, but that doesn't help a program in the state Nevada is in. Choate is a good coach who might cover a good amount of games this season, but it's hard to imagine four wins in 2025.

prediction

UNDER 3.5 WINS

NEW MEXICO
LOBOS

Head Coach: Jason Eck (1st)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 7-5 ATS, 9-3 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

7
OFFENSE: 3
DEFENSE: 4

schedule

SOS
36.83
(#75 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2/-0.4
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
150-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	33.7	17	38.3	127
YARDS PER POINT	14.8	80	12.7	112
PLAYS PER GAME	72.5	25		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:12	89		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	45.4%	19	49.7%	131
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	498.9	3	485.3	131
YARDS PER PLAY	6.9	3	6.7	128
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38.9	31		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	262.9	2	199.4	115
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	6.8	1	5.2	113
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	33.1	39		
COMPLETION %	57.1%	106	64.6%	104
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	236	52	285.9	128
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.1	75	8.6	123
TURNOVERS	1.6	88	0.7	128

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
27.5
CONFERENCE: #11 of 12
NATIONAL: #119 of 136

In 2024, New Mexico won the most games it had since 2016, but this Lobos program cannot have nice things. Bronco Mendenhall left Albuquerque for Logan, Utah and quarterback Devon Dampier moved 82 miles south to Salt Lake City. Jason Eck comes in from Idaho to reshape a gutted roster and inject life into a moribund program.

OFFENSE
Eck brought quarterback Jack Layne – his starter at Idaho last season – along with him to New Mexico. Layne was a solid passer at the FCS level. He completed 64.5% of his passes, averaged 9.8 yards per attempt and threw 14 touchdowns to four interceptions last year. Layne was adept at throwing the deep-ball. In 22 attempts of 20+ yards downfield, he completed 11 balls for 406 yards and four touchdowns with just two interceptions.

Layne's offensive coordinator from last season – Luke Schleusner – was also brought over when Eck was hired. Layne will be comfortable in this system, although the faces he's throwing to are all new.

The Lobos have a litany of transfers at the skill positions. At wide receiver, the top five pass-catchers from last season are gone. Keagan Johnson from Kansas State is the big name in the room, and tight end Dorian Thomas played in three games for Arizona last year.

At running back Eck brought in two high-level FCS transfers in Scottre Humphrey (Montana State) and Damon Bankston (Weber State) who were both 1,000-yard rushers last season. Four of the five starters from last year's offensive line are gone, so both will have their work cut out for them.

DEFENSE
New Mexico lost its top six defensive linemen from last season, so Eck did as much as he could to add some familiar faces to his defense as well. That includes First Team Big Sky defensive end Keyshawn James-Newby. There is also another member of that First Team unit in linebacker Jaxton Eck, Jason's son. There should be some cohesiveness in this front seven with James-Newby and Eck together once again.

The defensive backfield is completely overhauled. There are seven transfers in this unit, and the most familiar face is Tavian Combs who missed the 2024 season but has 25 starts to his name.

The Lobos gave up 38.0 points per game, 5.4 yards per carry and 6.8 yards per play in 2024. It seems extremely likely that the production for this group is similar, as Eck is rolling out what looks like a top-tier FCS defense.

OUTLOOK
What is there to say about New Mexico? The Lobos have won five or fewer games in 15 of the last 17 seasons. New head coach Jason Eck did what he could in the portal, but this team is devoid of much talent. Road trips to Michigan, UCLA, San José State, Boise State, UNLV and Air Force are also on the schedule. Does this team even win two games in 2025?

prediction
UNDER 3.5 WINS

SAN DIEGO STATE
AZTECS

Head Coach: Sean Lewis (2nd)
2024 Record: 3-9 SU & 5-7 ATS, 7-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

14
OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 10

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	STONY BROOK	-16.2	17
9/6	at Washington St	+6.9	35
9/20	CALIFORNIA	+9.1	42
9/27	at N Illinois	+2	31
10/3	COLORADO ST	+2.7	35.5
10/11	at Nevada	-1.6	27
10/25	at Fresno St	+9.4	37.5
11/1	WYOMING	+0.8	34
11/8	at Hawaii	+5.1	33
11/15	BOISE ST	+18.5	51
11/22	SAN JOSE ST	+4.8	37.5
11/28	at New Mexico	-1.3	27.5

SOS
33.85
(#106 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.3/0.3
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
30-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
150-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	19.2	119	31	99
YARDS PER POINT	16.9	118	14.3	76
PLAYS PER GAME	68.6	71		
TIME OF POSSESSION	27:00	123		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	35.8%	102	48.4%	126
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	323.9	114	443.3	118
YARDS PER PLAY	4.7	117	5.9	91
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.9	83		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	117.5	107	220.4	124
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.4	118	5.1	109
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	31.1	60		
COMPLETION %	62.0%	59	64.5%	102
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	206.4	89	222.9	67
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.6	105	7.7	88
TURNOVERS	0.8	15	0.8	121

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
30.5 CONFERENCE: #9 of 12
NATIONAL: #107 of 136

Sean Lewis comes into his second season at the helm looking to get San Diego State back to the postseason for the first time since 2022. The betting market believes that will be a difficult task to accomplish.

OFFENSE
One of Lewis' main tasks in fall camp will be to determine who will be his starting quarterback. Transfers Jayden Denegal (Michigan) and Bert Emanuel (Central Michigan) are the two candidates for the job and neither has an extensive playing history. Emanuel has just four starts, 88 dropbacks and 128 rushing attempts over his three seasons with the Chippewas. Senegal had just eight dropbacks in 2023 in his time with the Wolverines.

The running back and wide receiver positions will also have all new faces, as the Aztecs' top five rushers and four of the top five receivers are gone. Although, the running back position likely has the highest floor considering Lewis' ability to generate a running game through his scheme. SDSU also has four of the five starters back along the offensive line that paved the way for Marquez Cooper to rush for 1,274 yards and 12 touchdowns last year.

Lewis did land a big fish in the transfer portal in Texas A&M receiver Jacob Bostick. Jordan Napier (43 receptions, 440 yards) – the team's third-leading wide receiver last season – is the lone returner in the group. He was second in receptions and led the team in touchdowns. His presence should allow this group to hit the ground running.

DEFENSE
SDSU promoted their edge coach Rob Aurich to the position of defensive coordinator during the offseason after losing Eric Schmidt to North Dakota. Aurich held the same position at Idaho for two seasons and improved the Vandals' scoring defense by 9.47 points by the end of his second season. He gets a defense which brings back 10 starters from last season, so the expectations should be high for this group.

Among the top returning tacklers is defensive end Trey White. The senior defensive end was fourth in tackles but led the team in sacks (12.5) last year. He was named preseason Defensive Player of the Year. The defensive line will be a massive strength due to not only his presence, but that of two other returning starters and a group which has five players with at least four starts last season.

The secondary could be the best position group for the Aztecs though. All four starters are back for SDSU at the position. Chris Johnson and Bryce Phillips might be one of the best cornerback duos in the conference.

OUTLOOK
The term "unknown" is used quite a bit when evaluating teams, but San Diego State has a true one at the most important position. It must also face three of the top teams in the conference in Boise State, San José State and Fresno State. Still, this defense seems legitimately great on paper and there are winnable games on the team's non-conference schedule.

prediction
OVER 4.5 WINS

SAN JOSE STATE
SPARTANS

Head Coach: Ken Niumatalolo (2nd)
2024 Record: 7-6 SU & 6-7 ATS, 6-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

12
OFFENSE: 6 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 6

schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/29	C MICHIGAN	-12.4	28
9/6	at Texas	+34.9	69.5
9/20	IDAHO	-10.3	29.5
9/27	at Stanford	+2.1	38
10/3	NEW MEXICO	-12.9	27.5
10/11	at Wyoming	-1	34
10/17	at Utah St	-5.7	29.5
11/1	HAWAII	-7.6	33
11/8	AIR FORCE	-5	35
11/15	at Nevada	-8.4	27
11/22	at San Diego St	-4.8	30.5
11/29	FRESNO ST	-2.5	37.5

SOS
34.70
(#95 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.5/0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+700

MAKE PLAYOFF
30-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	27.3	62	27.8	77
YARDS PER POINT	15.1	88	13.9	83
PLAYS PER GAME	67.9	74		
TIME OF POSSESSION	26:21	130		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	39.5%	68	46.2%	117
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	411.5	37	386.8	71
YARDS PER PLAY	6.1	31	5.1	36
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	24.2	134		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	89.9	127	149.5	58
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.7	98	3.6	22
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	43	1		
COMPLETION %	57.2%	105	62.9%	88
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	321.6	5	237.3	88
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.5	53	7.2	60
TURNOVERS	2.2	131	1.9	13

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
37.5 CONFERENCE: #3 of 12
NATIONAL: #85 of 136

Ken Niumatalolo's squad was picked to finish 10th in the preseason poll last season and the Spartans' win total was 5.5 at most sportsbooks. SJSU shattered those expectations with seven wins and a berth in the Hawai'i Bowl. This season, the Spartans bring back 12 starters and are the third choice on the board to win the Mountain West.

OFFENSE
Walker Eget returns after starting the final seven games for the Spartans in 2024. Eget's numbers are not eye-popping – 56.5% completion, 13 touchdowns to 10 interceptions – but he played better than what that statline would indicate. PFF graded him as the highest-graded passer in the conference (82.6) from Week 6 on. Eget is also brilliant at keeping the ball out of danger – 1.9% turnover-worthy play rate as a starter – which should be a strength.

Three starters return along an offensive line which allowed Eget to be pressured on only 22.8% of his dropbacks. The running game should be even better as well with the return of leading rusher Floyd Chalk. Chalk averaged 4.8 yards per carry and ran for 10 touchdowns last season. He won't push for a 1,000-yard season given the offensive system, but is one of the better runners in the conference.

Wide receiver is the only position group that has real questions. Nick Nash (All-American) and Justin Lockhart. The receiver room is packed with new faces for the Spartans. Offensive coordinator Craig Stutzmann's system – the Spread-and-Shread – will ease the transition to a new group of pass-catchers.

DEFENSE
Six starters are back for the Spartans on the other side of the ball. Perhaps the most important is linebacker Jordan Pollard who led the team in tackles last season. Pollard led a front seven which allowed just 3.53 yards per carry and 147.7 yards per game. With three of the top four tacklers and most of the defensive line back bettors can expect a similar output against the run.

The backend of the defense has much bigger questions.

Niumatalolo had to hit the transfer portal hard in order to replace the three starters from a unit which picked off 21 passes. SJSU did land two former four-star prospects at cornerback in Washington transfer Caleb Presley and USC transfer Maliki Crawford. If both can live up their high-school rankings the Spartans could have a great defensive backfield once again.

OUTLOOK
The Spartans avoid both Boise State and UNLV on the schedule and they get both Air Force and Fresno State to make the trip to San Jose. Still, it would seem the market is slightly high on the Spartans. Their conference win total is 5.5 at DraftKings and their overall win total of 7.5 is third-highest in the Mountain West. A bowl is perfectly possible, but it's hard to buy at the top of the market in a conference loaded with parity under Boise State.

prediction

UNDER 7.5 WINS

UNLV
REBELS

Head Coach: Dan Mullen (1st)
2024 Record: 11-3 SU & 8-6 ATS, 6-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

4
OFFENSE: 2
DEFENSE: 2

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/23	IDAHO ST	-31	16
8/29	at Sam Houston St	-13.1	29
9/6	UCLA	+0.6	46.5
9/20	at Miami Ohio	-5.9	35.5
10/4	at Wyoming	-7.5	34
10/11	AIR FORCE	-11.3	35
10/18	at Boise St	+9.8	51
11/1	NEW MEXICO	-19.2	27.5
11/8	at Colorado St	-6.5	35.5
11/15	UTAH ST	-16.9	29.5
11/21	HAWAII	-13.9	33
11/29	at Nevada	-14.9	27

SOS
32.68
(#115 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.8/0.6
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+600

MAKE PLAYOFF
15-1

CFP CHAMPION
500-1

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	32.5	27	21.8	23
YARDS PER POINT	12.2	12	16.3	16
PLAYS PER GAME	66.1	92		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:40	77		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	39.1%	74	33.9%	22
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	398.5	49	355.5	45
YARDS PER PLAY	6	35	5	34
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	42.8	8		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	227.3	9	118.8	23
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.3	17	3.6	21
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	20.9	130		
COMPLETION %	62.1%	56	62.6%	86
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	171.2	117	236.6	87
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.2	26	6.9	44
TURNOVERS	0.6	2	1.6	40

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

43.5 CONFERENCE: #2 of 12
NATIONAL: #61 of 136

UNLV is coming off the best two-year stretch in program history. The Rebels made consecutive appearances in the Mountain West Championship game, won 20 games and its first bowl in 24 years. The architect of this revival – Barry Odom – is now the head coach of Purdue. Dan Mullen is now charged with keeping the hot streak going in Sin City.

OFFENSE
The presumed starter at quarterback is Virginia transfer Anthony Colandrea. In two seasons with the Cavaliers, he started 17 games and threw for 4,083 yards and 26 touchdowns. Colandrea also rushed for 502 yards. Alex Orji comes in from Michigan as well. Orji is expected to be the backup, but will likely see more time than a usual second-string signal caller.

UNLV's best weapon on offense will be running back Jai'Den Thomas who is back after leading the Rebels in rushing (940 yards) last season. The stable behind Thomas is a mystery though, as the seven other players who registered rushing yards for UNLV last season are all gone.

Mullen must also figure out what to do at wide receiver. Ricky White (79 receptions, 1,041 yards, 11 touchdowns) and Jacob De Jesus (36 receptions, 512 yards, 3 touchdowns) – the team's leading receivers last season – are gone. The room has been refreshed with a glut of transfers but it is unknown who is going to lead the way at this point.

DEFENSE
The mass exodus of players extends to the Rebels' defense as well this season. Only one player of note – Marsel McDuffie – is back from a unit which allowed 21.3 points per game and 5.0 yards per play. McDuffie was named to the preseason All-Mountain West Team, but what this unit will be under defensive coordinator Paul Guenther is a mystery.

Losses are heaviest in the secondary for the Rebels, where they lose both a Third Team All-American and a Third Team All-Mountain West player, as well as the rest of the unit from 2024 which helped the Rebels force 20 turnovers last season.

With so much turnover it is hard to project what this unit will be this season. It is safe to say it will be worse than what was arguably the best defense in program history, but how far will the drop be?

OUTLOOK
After two strong seasons, the expectations are very high for UNLV. The program was picked to finish second in the conference by the media, and it has the second-best odds to win the Mountain West at most sportsbooks. They must go to Boise, Laramie and Reno in conference play as well, which is a challenge, but the home schedule is manageable. In truth, the market is accurately priced with this team's win total of 8.5 shaded to the Under. With so much unknown it is hard to realistically expect nine or more wins until the product on the field is seen.

prediction

UNDER 8.5 WINS

UTAH STATE
AGGIES

Head Coach: Bronco Mendenhall (1st)
2024 Record: 4-8 SU & 4-6-2 ATS, 9-3 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

8 OFFENSE: 2 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 6

SOS
37.07
(#73 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.4/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
80-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	31.5	32	39.9	129
YARDS PER POINT	14.3	69	12	122
PLAYS PER GAME	75.6	5		
TIME OF POSSESSION	27:28	119		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	40.5%	59	44.1%	100
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	452.2	9	480.5	130
YARDS PER PLAY	6	39	6.4	115
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.5	74		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	189.8	25	222.1	125
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.3	14	5.5	128
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38.4	13		
COMPLETION %	64.7%	32	67.4%	123
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	262.4	30	258.4	116
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.8	91	8.1	101
TURNOVERS	1.7	104	1.4	66

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

29.5 CONFERENCE: #10 of 12
NATIONAL: #112 of 136

Bronco Mendenhall takes over this program after one season at New Mexico in which he led the Lobos to five victories. It doesn't sound like much, but it was the most for the program in eight years. Now Mendenhall has another rebuild on his hands in Logan, and this one won't be as simple.

OFFENSE
In Albuquerque, the turnaround was ignited by quarterback Devon Dampier. Mendenhall does have some returning production under center, but it is nowhere near the talent level that Dampier was. Bryson Barnes – a one-time Utah starter – is back after he started three games and appeared in seven for the Aggies last season.

Barnes is a dual-threat quarterback with a better ground game. He only completed 60.3% of his passes, averaged 6.4 yards per attempt and posted a turnover-worthy play rate of 4.5%. But, he ran 559 yards and five touchdowns on 8.9 yards per attempt. Mendenhall has had multiple dual-threat quarterbacks in his career, including in Albuquerque last season with Devon Dampier. Barnes is not at the same talent level, but Mendenhall should have an idea of what he wants from his quarterback this season.

The rest of the offense is a true question. Utah State's top three rushers and top five receivers all departed in the offseason. There are no returning starters along the offensive line, and the position group as a whole has 10 total career starts in it. Barnes ended the season on a strong run, but this unit looks like one of the worst in the conference.

DEFENSE
Mendenhall is known for running his complex 3-3-5 defense and it would seem he is not shying away from that as he transitions to Utah State. The Aggies do have six starters back in total from last season, but with a new system being installed the benefit of having those bodies back is dampened.

To speed up the process Mendenhall brought a few transfers from New Mexico with him. Among them is cornerback Bryson Taylor. Taylor started 11 games last season, broke up eight passes and racked up 49 tackles. He is partnered with the secondary's only returning starter: Ike Larsen. Larsen finished First Team All-Mountain West two years ago.

The Aggies allowed 37.8 points, 5.4 yards per carry and 6.5 yards per play in 2024. It's hard to be much worse than that. Mendenhall will likely improve those numbers, but bettors can expect this to be a subpar unit once again.

OUTLOOK
Utah State is not only transitioning to a new regime and rebuilding its roster, but it is doing so with a brutal schedule. The Aggies must face the top four teams on the oddsboard to win the Mountain West: Boise State, UNLV, San José State and Fresno State. They also host Air Force and in non-conference they go to Texas A&M. Mendenhall exceeded expectations last season with New Mexico because he had the pieces. He doesn't this time around.

prediction

UNDER 4.5 WINS

WYOMING
COWBOYS

Head Coach: Jay Sawvel (2nd)
2024 Record: 3-9 SU & 5-6-1 ATS, 6-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

12 OFFENSE: 9 QB
DEFENSE: 3

SOS
35.23
(#84 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/-0.4
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
40-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
100-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	19.9	115	29.4	88
YARDS PER POINT	16.8	115	14.6	70
PLAYS PER GAME	68.8	70		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:04	37		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	36.8%	91	27.5%	2
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	334	107	427.5	107
YARDS PER PLAY	4.9	109	6.6	123
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.5	45		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	138.8	82	197.8	113
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.7	100	5.7	132
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	29.2	78		
COMPLETION %	53.3%	123	62.0%	77
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	195.2	98	229.6	72
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.7	101	7.9	96
TURNOVERS	1.4	55	1	108

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
34.0 CONFERENCE: #7 of 12
NATIONAL: #99 of 136

Jay Sawvel's first season was a massive disappointment. Despite 13 starters returning for a coach who had been on the staff the year prior the Cowboys won just three games and regressed on both sides of the ball.

OFFENSE

Wyoming brings back nine starters back on offense this season. In most situations that is a positive, but this unit was abysmal in 2024. The Cowboys averaged 19.3 points per game, 3.6 yards per carry and 4.9 yards per play. Second-year offensive coordinator Jay Johnson has his work cut out for him, but the returning production should help.

The biggest returning piece – figuratively, but nearly literally – is sophomore quarterback Kaden Anderson. Anderson started the final three games for Wyoming in 2024 and burst onto the scene with 342 yards and three touchdowns against New Mexico. His next two starts were not as sensational – he threw for a combined 239 yards on 5.4 yards per attempt – but the upside is there.

Anderson should benefit from lining up behind an offensive line that returns almost entirely intact from last season, save for center Nofoafia Tulafono. He also gets a wide receiver group that is loaded with experience. Leading receiver Jaylen Sargent is back after catching 41 balls for 480 yards. True sophomore Chris Durr has some real buzz after leading receivers in reception rate and yards after catch per reception.

DEFENSE

The defense for Wyoming undergoes the most turnover this season, but given Sawvel's background this should not be a massive blow. It was also a below average group that allowed 5.5 yards per carry and 6.5 yards per play, so it's hard to weep over the lost "production".

It's hard to gauge how effective this group will be considering how many changes it has undergone. The defensive line is the position with the most coming back, and even in that instance six of the top nine from last season are out the door. Sawvel tried to recalibrate the linebacker group with high-end FCS transfers, but until this defense is seen it is nearly impossible to project its effectiveness.

OUTLOOK

It's hard to have a positive outlook for the Cowboys this season. Sawvel did less with more in 2024, and now he has a completely rebuilt defense and an offense which returns most of its personnel but was one of the worst in the Mountain West. Wyoming must also go to Air Force, Fresno State and Hawaii in conference. It also hosts UNLV. That is as hard as a schedule without Boise State on it can get. Perhaps Anderson really improves and this offense carries the Cowboys to unprecedented heights, but at this point five or fewer wins seems much more likely.

prediction

UNDER 5.5 WINS

PAC-12
preview

Coverage by
Jonathan Von Tobel

The "Pac-2" doesn't exactly need an overview, as it only has Oregon State and Washington State, but this is a good spot to talk about the new-look Pac-12. Well, much like the Big Ten (18 teams) and Big 12 (16 teams), the Pac-12 will not have 12 teams. For football, there will be eight teams and for basketball there will be nine teams beginning in 2026.

Those eight football members will include the Beavers and Cougars, along with Boise State, Colorado State, Fresno State, San Diego State, Texas State, and Utah State. Gonzaga will be a basketball-only member of the conference. In order to be considered a conference, a minimum of eight teams were required.

So, Oregon State and Washington State will be orphaned no more after this season. However, filling out a 2025 schedule was still tricky. The two teams actually play each other twice, with both games in November. The first will be in Corvallis and the second will be in Pullman.

Unlike last season, when the teams played a lot of Mountain West opponents, they will play whoever they could get to agree to a game. The Civil War and the Apple Cup will both be played on September 20 against Oregon and Washington, respectively. Otherwise, the schedules are a hodgepodge of MAC, FCS, ACC, Big 12, American, Conference USA, Sun Belt, and Mountain West teams.

2025 projected standings

TEAM	2024 SM PR	HOME FA	ROAD FA	SS (RANK)	ALL PRJW'S	ALL PRJL'S	CONF PRJW'S	CONF PRJL'S	DRAFTKINGS O/U
OREGON ST	39.5	3.5	-0.5	36.4 (78)	7.0	5.0			6.5
WASHINGTON ST	35	2.7	0.4	39.7 (68)	4.8	7.2			5.5

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OREGON STATE
BEAVERS

Head Coach: Trent Bray (2nd)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 4-8 ATS, 5-6-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

11 OFFENSE: 5
DEFENSE: 6

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	CALIFORNIA	-1.1	42
9/6	FRESNO ST	-5.5	37.5
9/13	at Texas Tech	+17	53.5
9/20	at Oregon	+27.9	64
9/26	HOUSTON	+1.6	44.5
10/4	at Appalachian St	-3.4	33
10/11	WAKE FOREST	-4.9	38
10/18	LAFAYETTE	-31.5	11.5
11/1	WASHINGTON ST	-7.6	35
11/8	SAM HOUSTON ST	-13.6	29
11/15	at Tulsa	-14.8	22.5
11/29	at Washington St	-1.3	35

SOS
36.40
(#78 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3.5/-0.5
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
NA

MAKE PLAYOFF
80-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	23	97	31.3	100
YARDS PER POINT	16.5	110	13	102
PLAYS PER GAME	72.3	27		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:45	10		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	42.3%	41	44.5%	104
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	379.7	65	408	97
YARDS PER PLAY	5.3	87	6.6	124
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38.7	32		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	173.5	44	195.3	110
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.5	57	5.3	118
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	31.5	57		
COMPLETION %	59.3%	89	61.4%	70
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	206.3	90	212.7	49
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.6	106	8.6	119
TURNOVERS	1.4	55	0.9	115

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
39.5 CONFERENCE: #1 of 2
NATIONAL: #77 of 136

Oregon State's 2024 was a year of turmoil and adversity. The Beavers had just five returning starters and went 5-7 SU/4-8 ATS in Trent Bray's first season. This year, Bray has 12 starters back and is looking to take a step forward.

OFFENSE
It's hard to be worse than what Oregon State was when it came to its passing offense last year. Between Gevani McCoy and Ben Gulbranson, the Beavers totaled 2,243 yards passing for the season. The two signal-callers posted a combined seven touchdown passes to 10 interceptions. Both are gone and in the portal comes former Texas and Duke quarterback Maalik Murphy.

In 12 starts for the Blue Devils last season, Murphy posted a 72.1 PFF passing grade. He threw 26 touchdowns to 12 interceptions with a pristine 2.8% turnover-worthy play rate. It's a low bar to clear, but Murphy should be a massive upgrade for this anemic passing attack.

Murphy's biggest weapon comes in the form of running back Anthony Hankerson. The senior ran for 1,082 yards and 15 touchdowns last year and he averaged 4.7 yards per carry. His offensive line will be entirely rebuilt from last season, but he is a good enough back to make any unit better.

With Murphy under center and Hankerson back at running back, this unit – which averaged 24.3 points per game and 5.6 yards per play – should be better than it was in 2024.

DEFENSE
The Beavers returned just one starter on defense in 2024 and that showed in the production. Oregon State allowed 29.9 points and 400 yards per game, as well as 6.5 yards per play. In 12 games they mustered just seven sacks. Obviously the hope is that there will be improvement with six starters back in 2025.

The strongest position group on paper seems to be the front seven. Only one piece along the defensive line – defensive tackle Semisi Saluni – is gone. Bray also added transfers to the group to solidify the depth overall.

At linebacker, the second-leading tackler Nikko Taylor is back. They also add a USC transfer to the mix and the rest of the group outside of the leading tackler from last season is here. Paired with an experienced defensive line, this front should be much better than the group that gave up 5.3 yards per carry last season.

The secondary is still a question, but it does boast good pieces like safety Skyler Thomas. With Bray leading the way, one would assume some minimal improvement.

OUTLOOK
Oregon State looks better on paper this season, but the schedule is a beast. The Beavers make trips in consecutive weeks to Texas Tech and Oregon. They host Houston and play Washington State in a home-and-home series this season. The price on the win total seems somewhat accurate, but laying -170 on an Over doesn't seem realistic despite the improvements.

prediction

UNDER 6.5 WINS

WASHINGTON STATE
COUGARS

Head Coach: Jimmy Rogers (1st)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 7-6 ATS, 7-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

8 OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 4

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	IDAHO	-8	29.5
9/6	SAN DIEGO ST	-6.9	30.5
9/13	at North Texas	+2.3	35
9/20	WASHINGTON	+13.4	51.5
9/27	at Colorado St	+2.2	35.5
10/11	at Ole Miss	+30.5	63
10/18	at Virginia	+9.7	43
10/25	TOLEDO	+2.4	40
11/1	at Oregon St	+7.6	39.5
11/15	LOUISIANA TECH	-8.3	30
11/22	at James Madison	+10.2	42
11/29	OREGON ST	+1.3	39.5

SOS
39.70
(#68 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/0.4
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
NA

MAKE PLAYOFF
100-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFESNE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	33.8	15	29.9	93
YARDS PER POINT	12.6	20	14.8	57
PLAYS PER GAME	67.2	81		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:23	82		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	42.2%	44	38.8%	60
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	426.7	28	442.1	116
YARDS PER PLAY	6.4	13	6.5	117
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.9	55		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	162	61	168.5	89
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.4	61	5.3	119
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	27.7	98		
COMPLETION %	74.1%	1	68.8%	128
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	264.7	23	273.6	124
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	9.6	3	7.9	97
TURNOVERS	1.2	38	1.8	20

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
35.0 CONFERENCE: #2 of 2
NATIONAL: #91 of 136

It is a new era in Pullman, as head coach Jake Dickert left in the offseason to take the Wake Forest job. Jimmy Rogers was hired from FCS powerhouse South Dakota State and will look to keep the Cougars' winning ways going.

OFFENSE
Washington State averaged 36.6 points and 6.6 yards per play in 2024. Those marks were the most the program had averaged since the 2019 season. Statistical decline should be expected for the Cougars after John Mateer left for Oklahoma in the offseason, but the dropoff might not be as dramatic.

Zevi Eckhaus is the expected starter for Washington State. Eckhaus started the bowl game for Wazzu against Syracuse and performed admirably with a thin roster. On 45 dropbacks against Syracuse, the senior signal-caller completed 72.1% of his passes for three touchdowns and two interceptions with an average of 8.4 yards per attempt. Eckhaus will be learning a new system, but he has experience with the little returning talent this unit has.

Most of the returning production for the Cougars is along the offensive line, where three starters are back. However, three of the top four rushers – including Mateer – and one of the top five receivers from last season are on the roster. It's never positive to have this much turnover, but with a returning quarterback and a solid offensive line, this group should be able to start strong.

DEFENSE
Rogers is a defensive coach and he brings his defensive coordinator – Jesse Bobbit – with him from South Dakota State. There is a scant amount of returning production on this side of the ball as well, but if there was a unit which could perform above expectation it could be this one.

The thinnest position on paper is the defensive line. All four starters from last season are gone, as is some of the depth. Rogers rebuilt the depth of this position group in the portal. There is some returning production – Isaac Terrell played in 12 games last season – but a group which allowed 5.2 yards per carry is likely worse.

Linebacker and defensive back are in slightly better shape. Linebacker Caleb Francl follows his head coach from South Dakota State after being named to the First All-American FCS Team. Keith Brown played in 13 games last season. In the defensive backfield Rogers has four members of his secondary from South Dakota State.

OUTLOOK
Last season, the two Pac-2 teams played a faux Mountain West conference schedule. That is not the case this season. The two teams will play each other twice, but the rest of their opponents are all over the place. The Cougars get five opponents off bye weeks, have consecutive road trips to Ole Miss and Virginia and get two Mountain West foes (SDSU, Colorado State). Given the turnover and difficult schedule, five wins seems like a fair result for the Cougars.

UNDER 5.5 WINS

SEC preview

Coverage by
Matt Youmans

It's probably just a little dry spell and not yet a drought, but the SEC failed to produce the national champion the past two years. For a conference that had won four titles in a row — LSU in 2019, Alabama in 2020 and Georgia in 2021 and 2022 — being shut out for a couple of years should be humbling. The hated Big Ten stepped up to steal the thunder, with Michigan winning it all in 2023, followed by Ohio State. Still, the SEC is in position to reclaim its college football dominance as Texas, Alabama, Georgia and LSU will be title contenders this season. The Longhorns boast quarterback Arch Manning, the most hyped player in the nation. The conference will feature what could be the top three quarterback prospects in next year's NFL Draft in Manning, LSU's Garrett Nussmeier and South Carolina's LaNorris Sellers.

The SEC is loaded with as many as 10 to 12 teams worthy of Top 25 rankings, star quarterbacks and coaches on the hot seat. Nick Saban was the definition of a tough act to follow, and Kalen DeBoer didn't win many friends at Alabama with a 9-4 debut. DeBoer is a good bet to bounce back, but what about Hugh Freeze at Auburn, Brent Venables at Oklahoma, Billy Napier at Florida, Sam Pittman at Arkansas and Mark Stoops at Kentucky?

This conference's strength will get tested immediately in a pair of Aug. 30 heavyweight fights — Texas at Ohio State, and LSU at Clemson. The biggest SEC games to circle on the schedule are Alabama at Georgia (Sept. 27), LSU at Alabama (Nov. 8) and Texas at Georgia (Nov. 15). Bulldogs coach Kirby Smart is happy to welcome the Crimson Tide and Longhorns between the hedges in Athens.

Circa Sports posts Georgia and Texas as +300 co-favorites to win the conference, followed by Alabama (+475) and LSU (+700). At DraftKings, the Longhorns are the second choice (+550) behind national championship favorite Ohio State (+500), and Manning is the +650 Heisman Trophy favorite.

2025 projected standings

TEAM	2024 SM PR	HOME FA	ROAD FA	SS (RANK)	ALL PRJW'S	ALL PRJL'S	CONF PRJW'S	CONF PRJL'S	DRAFTKINGS O/U
TEXAS	69.5	3	-0.2	49.43 (12)	10.0	2.0	6.6	1.4	9.5
GEORGIA	68.5	2.6	0.1	48.03 (20)	10.0	2.0	6.0	2.0	9.5
ALABAMA	67.5	2.8	-0.4	49.6 (11)	9.7	2.3	5.9	2.1	9.5
OLE MISS	63	2.9	0	46.74 (30)	9.3	2.7	5.4	2.6	8.5
LSU	62.5	3.1	-0.3	50.65 (7)	8.3	3.7	4.9	3.1	8.5
TENNESSEE	59.5	3.2	-0.2	45.63 (37)	8.7	3.3	4.8	3.2	8.5
TEXAS A&M	60	2.9	-0.6	50.49 (8)	7.8	4.2	4.6	3.4	8.5
AUBURN	57	2.4	-0.1	49.14 (14)	7.5	4.5	4.0	4.0	7.5
SOUTH CAROLINA	58	2.8	0.2	51.11 (4)	7.3	4.7	4.0	4.0	7.5
FLORIDA	59.5	2.6	-0.5	52.51 (1)	7.0	5.0	3.9	4.2	7.5
MISSOURI	53.5	2.6	-0.1	46.75 (29)	7.1	4.9	3.5	4.5	7.5
OKLAHOMA	58.5	2.7	-0.4	50.74 (6)	7.0	5.0	3.5	4.5	6.5
ARKANSAS	52	2.2	0.6	51.07 (5)	5.5	6.5	2.7	5.3	5.5
VANDERBILT	48	2.1	0.1	48.94 (16)	5.1	6.9	1.8	6.2	5.5
KENTUCKY	48	2.5	0.3	51.48 (3)	4.6	7.4	1.6	6.4	4.5
MISSISSIPPI ST	44	2.3	0.1	50.29 (10)	3.9	8.1	1.0	7.0	3.5

ALABAMA
CRIMSON TIDE
Head Coach: Kalen DeBoer (2nd)
2024 Record: 9-4 SU & 7-6 ATS, 6-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS
15
OFFENSE: 7
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	at Florida St	-14.8	50
9/6	LA MONROE	-42.2	28.5
9/13	WISCONSIN	-20.7	49.5
9/27	at Georgia	+4	68.5
10/4	VANDERBILT	-22.2	48
10/11	at Missouri	-11	53.5
10/18	TENNESSEE	-11	59.5
10/25	at South Carolina	-6.3	58
11/8	LSU	-8.1	62.5
11/15	OKLAHOMA	-12.2	58.5
11/22	E ILLINOIS	-62.6	8
11/29	at Auburn	-7.7	57

SOS
49.60
(#11 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.8/-0.4
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+380

MAKE PLAYOFF
-200

CFP CHAMPION
11-1

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	32.3	29	18.3	9
YARDS PER POINT	12.5	15	18.1	6
PLAYS PER GAME	65.6	98		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:58	94		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	46.7%	11	33.3%	15
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	402.3	45	330.3	24
YARDS PER PLAY	6.1	23	4.6	10
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.1	52		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	172.8	45	144.5	52
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.7	42	3.8	26
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	26.5	107		
COMPLETION %	63.8%	36	59.3%	41
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	229.5	57	185.8	19
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.7	8	6	7
TURNOVERS	1.8	108	2.1	5

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
67.5 CONFERENCE: #3 of 16
NATIONAL: #5 of 136

One month into his first season in Tuscaloosa, Kalen DeBoer was a conquering hero. His 4-0 start was highlighted by a thrilling 41-34 victory over Georgia. However, the Crimson Tide dropped two of the next three games, falling on the road to Vanderbilt and Tennessee, and the honeymoon was over. Another ugly loss at Oklahoma and a disgraceful bowl effort against a Michigan team with a skeleton crew sealed DeBoer's debut year as a big disappointment. A 9-4 finish is fine for most programs, but it's unacceptable at Alabama. DeBoer is a good bet to bounce back. He's a great coach with a proven track record. It never was going to be easy to follow Nick Saban.

OFFENSE
DeBoer's reputation as an offensive innovator took a hit last season in the low-scoring losses to Tennessee, Oklahoma and Michigan. His offensive coordinator at Washington, Ryan Grubb, did not follow him to Alabama and instead went to the NFL. After one year with the Seahawks, Grubb is back with DeBoer. The OC change is a major plus, and a new quarterback might also help. Former quarterback Jalen Milroe was a much better athlete than a passer, but Milroe is now an NFL project, and former five-star recruit Ty Simpson is expected to take over the starting job. Simpson will trigger a vertical passing attack that takes advantage of star wideout Ryan Williams, who had a sensational 177-yard game against Georgia yet finished the season with only 48 receptions for 865 yards. Simpson, Williams and running back Jam Miller are set up for success. Parker Brailsford, Kadyn Proctor and Jaeden Roberts anchor one of the nation's elite lines.

DEFENSE
Despite surrendering 40 points to Vanderbilt in an embarrassing upset, the Tide ranked No. 10 in scoring defense (17.4 ppg). Second-year coordinator Kane Wommack has seven starters returning and gets an infusion of transfer talent. Four seniors — end LT Overton, tackle Tim Keenan and linebackers Deontae Lawson and Justin Jefferson — lead the front and four starters are back in the secondary. The talent is there for this unit to be as strong as some of Saban's defenses.

OUTLOOK
It has been a long time since this was said, but Alabama might be underrated. Simpson, who has attempted only 50 passes in three years as a backup, has a shot to develop into a star in Grubb's new offense. The defense has the potential to be great. DeBoer and the players who experienced the lows of last season will be highly motivated. The Tide must navigate treacherous trips to Georgia, Missouri, South Carolina and Auburn to return to the playoffs after being relegated to the ReliaQuest Bowl. It's a tough call at 9.5 wins, yet the Over price of -115 is reasonable.

prediction
OVER 9.5 WINS

ARKANSAS
RAZORBACKS

Head Coach: Sam Pittman (6th)
2024 Record: 7-6 SU & 8-5 ATS, 7-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

13 OFFENSE: 7 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 6

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	ALABAMA A&M	-49	5.5
9/6	vs. Arkansas St	-21.2	33.5
9/13	at Ole Miss	+13.3	63
9/20	at Memphis	-6.4	43.5
9/27	NOTRE DAME	+12.1	65.5
10/11	at Tennessee	+10.1	59.5
10/18	TEXAS A&M	+5.2	60
10/25	AUBURN	+2.7	57
11/1	MISSISSIPPI ST	-10.1	44
11/15	at LSU	+13	62.5
11/22	at Texas	+19.9	69.5
11/29	MISSOURI	-0.8	53.5

SOS
51.07
(#5 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.2/0.6
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
150-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
16-1

CFP CHAMPION
400-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
--	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	27.7	58	27.1	73
YARDS PER POINT	15.9	100	14.6	66
PLAYS PER GAME	72.7	21		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:15	58		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	40.4%	62	37.8%	51
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	440.6	15	396.8	85
YARDS PER PLAY	6.1	29	5.6	70
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38.3	37		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	177	37	139.7	44
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.6	43	3.8	33
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	31.4	59		
COMPLETION %	60.2%	75	62.7%	87
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	263.6	27	257.1	115
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.4	15	7.8	94
TURNOVERS	1.9	122	1.3	80

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
52.0 CONFERENCE: #13 of 16
NATIONAL: #33 of 136

As sixth-year coach Sam Pittman fights for his coaching life in Fayetteville, no prognosticators are picking Arkansas to finish in the top half of the league. But Pittman is showing a pulse, mostly due to offensive coordinator Bobby Petrino and quarterback Taylen Green. The Razorbacks were really good on offense a year ago, which is why they finished 7-6 with a Liberty Bowl win, and should be better. The defense could be a problem, and the schedule certainly will be more problematic. Remember the scene in 2012 when a banged-up Petrino appeared in public with bruises on his face while wearing a neck brace? The Razorbacks could look like that in November.

OFFENSE
Green, a former Boise State transfer, is expected to blossom in Petrino's offense. Last year, he passed for 3,154 yards and 15 touchdowns with nine interceptions while running for 602 yards and eight touchdowns. Green showed his potential in the bowl game by passing for 341 yards and two touchdowns and running for 81 yards in the 39-26 victory over Texas Tech, which allowed 573 total yards. Petrino is an oddball, but his offensive mind is always sharp. Arkansas ranked 10th in total offense (459.5 yards per game) and 44th in scoring (30.9 ppg). The line is being rebuilt with the help of transfers, and the same is true of the receiver crew. The ground attack appears promising, led by Green and running backs Braylen Russell, Rodney Hill and Mike Washington Jr., an impressive transfer from New Mexico State.

DEFENSE
The Razorbacks will need to win some shootouts because last year's below-average defense brings back only three starters. Senior tackle Cameron Ball anchors the front, and senior linebackers Stephen Dix and Xavian Sorey represent the strength of the unit. Arkansas was inconsistent last season, allowing 63 points to Mississippi yet holding Texas to 20 and limiting Auburn and Tennessee to 14 points apiece. Pittman brought in several transfers, so improvement will depend on how many pan out.

OUTLOOK
Arkansas will start 2-0 before hitting a four-game stretch (at Ole Miss, at Memphis, Notre Dame, at Tennessee) that will leave Pittman sleepless and maybe winless. His job will be on the line. The Razorbacks finish with road trips to LSU and Texas prior to hosting Missouri in the finale. With 58 new players, including 31 transfers, on the roster, this is a dice roll. A high-scoring offense is the only guarantee for Arkansas.

prediction

UNDER 5.5 WINS

AUBURN
TIGERS

Head Coach: Hugh Freeze (3rd)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 6-6 ATS, 5-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

14 OFFENSE: 8
DEFENSE: 6

SOS
49.14
(#14 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.4/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
28-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+400

CFP CHAMPION
70-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	23.6	93	23	35
YARDS PER POINT	17.4	125	14.7	61
PLAYS PER GAME	68.4	73		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:29	106		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	40.4%	61	42.0%	85
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	411.4	38	339	30
YARDS PER PLAY	6	38	4.9	22
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.1	81		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	164.5	55	125.2	28
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.7	41	3.3	13
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	31	61		
COMPLETION %	62.2%	55	57.2%	17
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	246.9	41	213.8	52
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8	33	7.4	69
TURNOVERS	1.5	67	1.1	101

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

57.0 CONFERENCE: #11 of 16
NATIONAL: #18 of 136

When the Auburn coaching job opened two years ago, some influential people around the program lobbied for Deion Sanders. The Tigers instead hired Hugh Freeze, who has so far flopped with an 11-14 record. Freeze has recruited well, so there is hope on the horizon. The recruit getting the most hype is transfer quarterback Jackson Arnold from Oklahoma. Freeze is on a hot seat and his third year needs to produce a winning record. The outlook is fairly optimistic, starting with the Arnold addition.

OFFENSE

Freeze's offense fell short last season, ranking 71st in scoring and sinking to depressing depths in a 17-7 home loss to Vanderbilt. Arnold was hailed as a big-time recruit at Oklahoma, but he never fully developed and was inconsistent. A part-time starter, Arnold passed for 1,421 yards and 12 touchdowns with three interceptions while running for 444 yards. He did direct the Sooners to an upset of Alabama before announcing transfer plans. The depth at the position is reassuring if Arnold doesn't get the job done. The backups are Stanford transfer Ashton Daniels and freshman Deuce Knight, a top-rated recruit. Cam Coleman returns after making eight touchdown catches as a freshman, and Georgia Tech transfer Eric Singleton is expected to make a major impact at receiver. The line should be a strength and the running attack could improve, although leading rusher Jarquez Hunter was drafted by the Rams.

DEFENSE

Junior end Keldrick Faulk, who had seven sacks last year and has NFL first-round potential, is the only returning starter in the front seven. Four starters return in the secondary, but this is an inexperienced unit with several new faces and it's a reason to be skeptical about Auburn's ability to win big games. The defense was solid last season, ranking 28th in scoring (21.3 ppg), but seems likely to decline.

OUTLOOK

Auburn won five games a year ago, and that win total is even less impressive when considering Alabama A&M, New Mexico, UL Monroe and Kentucky were four of the victims. Freeze must start fast against Baylor, Ball State and South Alabama because the next three games (at Oklahoma, at Texas A&M, Georgia) will see the Tigers in the underdog role. Arnold's homecoming game against the Sooners on Sept. 20 could be pivotal. All things considered, the schedule is not bad because Texas, LSU, South Carolina and Florida are excluded and the Tigers will get Alabama and Georgia at Jordan-Hare Stadium. The win total is 7.5 at DraftKings and 8 at Circa Sports.

prediction

UNDER 8 WINS

FLORIDA
GATORS

Head Coach: Billy Napier (4th)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 9-3-1 ATS, 6-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

15
OFFENSE: 8 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 7

SOS
52.51
(#1 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/-0.5
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
18-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+400

CFP CHAMPION
40-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	26.9	64	24.4	50
YARDS PER POINT	13.6	52	16	20
PLAYS PER GAME	63.5	120		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:44	100		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	37.3%	87	39.7%	70
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	366.5	82	391.4	75
YARDS PER PLAY	5.8	48	5.2	47
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.7	72		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	160.8	63	157	71
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.5	51	3.9	47
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	26.2	110		
COMPLETION %	60.2%	76	57.2%	18
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	205.7	91	234.4	84
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.9	37	7.3	61
TURNOVERS	1.5	70	2	8

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
59.5 CONFERENCE: #8 of 16
NATIONAL: #15 of 136

Billy Napier was a dubious hire at Florida, something that was evident from the start. While he was successful at Louisiana, he never was a game-management genius, and the margin for error in the SEC is extremely slim. "Sun Belt Billy" has been out of his league, going 19-19 in three years. It got ugly in last year's opener when the Gators were embarrassed 41-17 by Miami in Gainesville, and Napier nearly got into a scuffle with the team mascot, Albert the Alligator. His job was on the line and eventually saved by the emergence of freshman quarterback DJ Lagway and a four-game win streak to finish the season. Napier's 8-5 record was more than respectable, but now he needs some luck to go his way because the schedule is full of speed traps on the road.

OFFENSE
Lagway, who replaced injured veteran Graham Mertz, started seven games and displayed exciting athletic ability. After throwing for 12 touchdowns with nine interceptions, the sophomore must improve as a passer, though a tricky issue has surfaced. Lagway did not throw much in the spring and summer because of a shoulder injury that could be a big deal if it lingers. Louisville transfer Harrison Bailey is the backup. The best news is the line brings back four high-quality starters. Leading rusher Jadan Baugh also returns, and the receiver group looks promising with Eugene Wilson, five-star freshman Dallas Wilson and UCLA transfer J. Michael Sturdivant.

DEFENSE
The Gators were gashed for 27.3 ppg in last season's first four games. The defense displayed dramatic improvement after that, allowing 19 ppg in the final nine games and that stretch included blowout losses to Georgia (34-20) and Texas (49-17). Senior end Tyreak Sapp, tackle Caleb Banks and safety Bryce Thornton will lead a unit that welcomes several talented recruits.

OUTLOOK
Florida faces a nightmare three-game gauntlet from mid-September to early October with back-to-back trips to LSU and Miami prior to a home date with Texas. The Gators later leave the Swamp to play Texas A&M, Georgia and Mississippi. It's not safe to assume Lagway's shoulder will stay strong, so be careful with this team. If healthy, Lagway could be sensational. The recruiting class ranked in the nation's top 10 and the talent level in the program is far more impressive. However, Napier will not have a coaching edge in many matchups. A seven-win season and a bowl game should be deemed a success, even if Albert the Alligator demands more.

prediction
UNDER 7.5 WINS

GEORGIA
BULLDOGS
Head Coach: Kirby Smart (10th)
2024 Record: 11-3 SU & 4-10 ATS, 6-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS
11 OFFENSE: 5
DEFENSE: 6

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	MARSHALL	-38.8	32
9/6	AUSTIN PEAY	-56.4	14.5
9/13	at Tennessee	-5.9	59.5
9/27	ALABAMA	-4	67.5
10/4	KENTUCKY	-22.8	48
10/11	at Auburn	-9.2	57
10/18	OLE MISS	-8.1	63
11/1	vs. Florida	-12.1	59.5
11/8	at Mississippi St	-22.3	44
11/15	TEXAS	-1.8	69.5
11/22	CHARLOTTE	-45.6	25.5
11/28	vs. Georgia Tech	-18.7	52

SOS
48.03
(#20 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+330

MAKE PLAYOFF
-250

CFP CHAMPION
+700

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	30.2	37	21.9	24
YARDS PER POINT	13.2	37	15.8	24
PLAYS PER GAME	69.5	61		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:59	69		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	38.9%	75	33.0%	12
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	398.4	50	345.5	36
YARDS PER PLAY	5.7	51	5	29
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	31.1	110		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	121.3	102	131.3	32
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.9	84	3.8	35
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.6	23		
COMPLETION %	64.7%	31	58.9%	37
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	277.1	14	214.2	53
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.6	49	6.7	36
TURNOVERS	1.5	76	1.4	62

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
68.5 CONFERENCE: #2 of 16
NATIONAL: #3 of 136

A program that won back-to-back national championships in 2021 and 2022 is not in decline. As a matter of fact, Georgia is the reigning SEC champion, thanks to a pair of victories over Texas last season. The Bulldogs don't boast a quarterback who's a top NFL prospect, but they have plenty of firepower to make another deep postseason run. Much will depend on the growth of Gunner Stockton, who's pulling the trigger on the offense. Georgia coach Kirby Smart's 53-5 record over the past four years is the best in college football. This is a young team, but it's still a Top 10 team.

OFFENSE
Stockton stepped in for an injured Carson Beck during the SEC title game and helped the Bulldogs beat the Longhorns 22-19. He passed for 234 yards in a playoff loss to Notre Dame, doing enough to win the job and show he can be the guy. Beck took the money and ran to Miami, but he's not really going to be missed. The Stockton-led offense should be better. Sophomore running back Nate Frazier is a rising star, and USC transfer Zachariah Branch is a big-play receiver with speed to burn. The line lost four starters and could be a concern, but it has the makings of a big, physical line that will help the Bulldogs improve the conference's 15th-ranked rushing attack.

DEFENSE
Georgia annually loses stars to the NFL and reloads. The names change, yet the story remains the same. Smart is a lot like Nick Saban in that you don't worry about the defense he will put on the field. While first-round picks Mykel Williams, Jalon Walker and Malaki Starks are gone, the replacements can play at a high level. The new leaders will be safety KJ Bolden, nose tackle Christen Miller, linebacker CJ Allen and corners Daylen Everette and Daniel Harris.

OUTLOOK
Smart has praised himself and his staff for going 11-3 against a brutal schedule last year. The Bulldogs were 1-2 in road games against Alabama, Mississippi and Texas, and this time all three of those teams will be coming to Georgia. The schedule is much more favorable. Smart hit the kitchen and cooked up three nonconference cupcakes by adding Austin Peay, Charlotte and Marshall. Stockton still is somewhat of a mystery, and if the junior quarterback is good, Georgia could be great. This team probably will win either nine or 10 games in the regular season, though 10 seems to be the ceiling. While it's smart to be cautiously optimistic with a roster that is inexperienced, Smart can win big with this schedule.

prediction
OVER 9.5 WINS

KENTUCKY
WILDCATS

Head Coach: Mark Stoops (13th)
2024 Record: 4-8 SU & 7-5 ATS, 4-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

12 OFFENSE: 7
DEFENSE: 5

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	TOLEDO	-10.4	40
9/6	OLE MISS	+12.5	63
9/13	E MICHIGAN	-23.3	27
9/27	at South Carolina	+12.5	58
10/4	at Georgia	+22.8	68.5
10/18	TEXAS	+18.8	69.5
10/25	TENNESSEE	+8.8	59.5
11/1	at Auburn	+11.1	57
11/8	FLORIDA	+8.5	59.5
11/15	TENNESSEE TECH	-30.4	20
11/22	at Vanderbilt	+1.8	48
11/29	at Louisville	+9	54

SOS
51.48
(#3 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.5/0.3
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
250-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
40-1

CFP CHAMPION
500-1

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	18.1	124	23.5	42
YARDS PER POINT	17	119	15	49
PLAYS PER GAME	64.3	112		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:06	65		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	33.6%	119	43.1%	95
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	307.5	124	353.4	41
YARDS PER PLAY	4.8	116	5.7	77
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.1	67		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	134.4	87	168.4	88
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.7	97	4.5	77
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	25.4	115		
COMPLETION %	52.0%	128	66.0%	112
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	173.2	115	185	17
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.8	93	8.1	105
TURNOVERS	1.8	114	1.2	94

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

48.0 CONFERENCE: #15 of 16
NATIONAL: #47 of 136

In 12 years at Kentucky, Mark Stoops has established himself as the program's all-time winningest coach with a 77-73 record. Still, he was a big loser last season, going 4-8 with a 1-7 mark in conference play. There were two positives — the Wildcats didn't finish last in the 16-team league (Mississippi State went 0-8) and their one SEC win was a major upset that basically knocked Mississippi out of College Football Playoff contention. Kentucky's other three victories were over lightweights Murray State, Ohio and Southern Miss. Stoops' seat is getting hot. He has three more cupcakes on his nonconference schedule, but the league schedule is tougher than a $2 steak and it appears Stoops will be starving for wins.

OFFENSE
Zach Calzada, a transfer from Incarnate Word and Texas A&M, is expected to win the quarterback job in his seventh college season. Kentucky used three quarterbacks who combined for 15 touchdown passes and 16 interceptions last season. Calzada should be an upgrade, but if he falters, the Wildcats could turn to highly-touted redshirt freshman Cutter Boley. The line was a wreck last season and might not be much better with a patchwork group of transfers. Stoops needs to hit on a couple of other transfers — running back Dante Dowdell from Nebraska and receiver Kendrick Law from Alabama. Calzada or Boley can help the Wildcats improve after ranking 119th in scoring offense (20.6 ppg).

DEFENSE
Stoops' defense kept Kentucky in some big games, including a 13-12 loss to Georgia, and ranked a respectable 33rd in scoring (22.1 ppg). But a unit that allowed just 15 ppg against Georgia and Ole Miss also was gashed for 48 points by Florida and 41 points by Louisville. Senior nose guard David Gusta from Washington State is Stoops' most promising transfer addition. Senior linebacker Alex Afari and senior safety Jordan Lovett are the best players on the second and third levels.

OUTLOOK
Assuming the Wildcats will handle Toledo, Eastern Michigan and Tennessee Tech, they will need two more wins to go Over a low total. But the worst teams in the league, aside from Kentucky, are Arkansas and Mississippi State and those opponents are not on Stoops' schedule. The Wildcats could beat Tennessee in Lexington, but they must also pull a major upset or get a win at Auburn or Vanderbilt to overachieve. A team with a journeyman quarterback and countless question marks throughout the roster is a tough team to bet on, so this play is Under or pass.

prediction

UNDER 4.5 WINS

LSU

LSU TIGERS

Head Coach: Brian Kelly (4th)
2024 Record: 9-4 SU & 5-8 ATS, 5-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

16 OFFENSE: 8 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	at Clemson	+3.8	63.5
9/6	LOUISIANA TECH	-36.2	30
9/13	FLORIDA	-6.6	59.5
9/20	SE LOUISIANA	-45	20.5
9/27	at Ole Miss	+3.7	63
10/11	SOUTH CAROLINA	-7.4	58
10/18	at Vanderbilt	-12.1	48
10/25	TEXAS A&M	-6.2	60
11/8	at Alabama	+8.1	67.5
11/15	ARKANSAS	-13	52
11/22	W KENTUCKY	-30.3	35
11/29	at Oklahoma	-1	58.5

SOS
50.65
(#7 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3.1/-0.3
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+700

MAKE PLAYOFF
+125

CFP CHAMPION
18-1

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	29.3	47	24.6	53
YARDS PER POINT	14.8	83	15.1	42
PLAYS PER GAME	71.9	31		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:19	16		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	49.7%	4	40.3%	75
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	435.3	19	370.2	58
YARDS PER PLAY	6.1	34	5.7	80
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	29.3	120		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	121.1	104	139.4	43
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.1	76	4.3	65
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	41.3	5		
COMPLETION %	63.6%	37	60.2%	54
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	314.2	6	230.8	75
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.6	47	7.8	90
TURNOVERS	1.4	63	1.1	105

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

62.5 CONFERENCE: #5 of 16
NATIONAL: #10 of 136

In three years in Baton Rouge, Brian Kelly has coached LSU to a 29-11 record and produced a Heisman Trophy winner. It's not enough. Kelly needs to reach the next level to quiet his critics, but that's life in the SEC at elite programs. Kelly and his staff (and big-money boosters) hit the portal and hauled in arguably the nation's top-ranked transfer class. Kelly also has a fifth-year quarterback, Garrett Nussmeier, who's a Heisman candidate. The schedule is a bear, especially on the road, but a conference title is a realistic goal in the eyes of the Tigers.

OFFENSE

It all starts with Nussmeier, who's among the nation's best even if he's not quite Jayden Daniels or Joe Burrow. Nussmeier passed for 4,052 yards and 29 touchdowns last season. He's got Aaron Anderson and Chris Hilton as returning receivers, and Nic Anderson is a hyped transfer from Oklahoma. Leading rusher Caden Durham also returns, but four starters must be replaced on the line. Nussmeier came on strong late as the Tigers thrashed the Sooners 37-17 in the regular-season finale and blew out Baylor 44-31 in the Texas Bowl. The passing offense, which ranked No. 7 nationally at 315 yards per game, could be more potent.

DEFENSE

Several problems plagued the LSU defense, which ranked 59th in scoring (24.3 ppg), and injuries and a lack of talent topped the list. Star linebacker Harold Perkins is back after missing most of the season with a knee injury. Junior linebacker Whit Weeks, who had a team-high 125 tackles, is about as good as it gets in the SEC. Edge rusher Patrick Payton (Florida State) is one of many transfers who will step in to make a major impact. This unit will be vastly improved with an infusion of talent all over the field.

OUTLOOK

The last thing LSU fans want to see again is Kelly banging his fists in fury after another sloppy early-season flop. The Tigers have lost their past five openers, and it only gets tougher as they open at Clemson on Aug. 30. Kelly might have won the transfer derby, but he didn't hit the schedule lottery. The Tigers face conference road tests against Alabama, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Vanderbilt. The home schedule features Florida, South Carolina and Texas A&M. LSU, which did catch breaks by avoiding Georgia and Texas this season, is likely to be favored in nine games and possibly 10. It's tough to see the Tigers topping 10-2, but Kelly would take that or 9-3 and the playoff spot that comes with it.

prediction

OVER 8.5 WINS

MISSISSIPPI STATE
BULLDOGS
Head Coach: Jeff Lebby (2nd)
2024 Record: 2-10 SU & 7-5 ATS, 8-4 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS
16 OFFENSE: 9 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 7

SOS
50.29
(#10 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.3/0.1
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
500-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
75-1

CFP CHAMPION
800-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	23.1	96	36.5	123
YARDS PER POINT	16	101	12.9	107
PLAYS PER GAME	69.6	59		
TIME OF POSSESSION	26:02	131		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	36.2%	96	48.3%	124
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	370.5	73	471	127
YARDS PER PLAY	5.3	82	6.5	120
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.9	83		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	132	90	225.2	130
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.8	92	5.1	110
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	31.5	57		
COMPLETION %	57.8%	103	72.0%	132
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	238.5	51	245.8	99
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.6	48	8.9	127
TURNOVERS	1.6	88	1	108

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
44.0 CONFERENCE: #16 of 16
NATIONAL: #60 of 136

After successful stints as offensive coordinator at Ole Miss and Oklahoma, Jeff Lebby was hired as Mississippi State coach. He's not making anyone around Starkville forget the late, great Mike Leach. In Lebby's first season, the Bulldogs were bad on offense and even worse on defense. The result was a rock-bottom 0-8 finish in the SEC, with all eight losses by double-digit margins. The most alarming wake-up call was a 41-17 home loss to Toledo. There is a real possibility this team will go winless in conference play again this season.

OFFENSE
Baylor transfer Blake Shapen got off to a good start by passing for 974 yards and eight touchdowns in four games before going down with a season-ending shoulder injury. Shapen is back and his backups are highly-touted freshman KaMario Taylor and Florida State transfer Luke Kromenhoek. Lebby's offense, which ranked 86th in scoring, has a chance to make a significant leap if Shapen stays healthy. There are four running backs (Davon Booth, Johnnie Daniels, Xavier Gayten and South Alabama transfer Fluff Bothwell) capable of carrying the mail. Three SEC transfer receivers — Anthony Evans (Georgia), Brenen Thompson (Oklahoma) and Ayden Williams (Ole Miss) — could step in to make plays. The biggest concern is a line that Lebby is rebuilding with a handful of transfers.

DEFENSE
The Bulldogs ranked 125th in total defense (456 yards per game), 129th in rushing (217 ypg) and 117th in scoring (34.1 ppg). It was the second-worst defense among all Power-4 conference teams, ahead of only Purdue, the last-place team in the Big Ten. The brightest spot was Isaac Smith, who led the team with 127 tackles and returns as one of the SEC's top safeties. The middle of the defense is a strength, with linebacker Jalen Smith set to make a major impact as a transfer from Tennessee.

OUTLOOK
Eight other teams in the SEC are looking at Mississippi State on the schedule and counting it as a win. Kentucky, the league's other seemingly hopeless team, is unfortunately not on the Bulldogs' schedule. Lebby went 2-10 last season and beat only Eastern Kentucky and Massachusetts. He will whip two more nonconference lightweights, Alcorn State and Northern Illinois, this season. Shapen is the key to the Bulldogs showing improvement and pulling a conference upset or two. But there's no use here in trying to put lipstick on a pig because it looks ridiculous and irritates the pig.

prediction
UNDER 3.5 WINS

MISSOURI
TIGERS

Head Coach: Eli Drinkwitz (6th)
2024 Record: 10-3 SU & 9-4 ATS, 6-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

15 OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 9

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	C ARKANSAS	-37.2	19
9/6	KANSAS	-6.6	49.5
9/13	LA LAFAYETTE	-17.4	38.5
9/20	SOUTH CAROLINA	+2.1	58
9/27	MASSACHUSETTS	-35.5	21
10/11	ALABAMA	+11	67.5
10/18	at Auburn	+6	57
10/25	at Vanderbilt	-3.3	48
11/8	TEXAS A&M	+3.3	60
11/15	MISSISSIPPI ST	-12	44
11/22	at Oklahoma	+7.8	58.5
11/29	at Arkansas	+0.8	52

SOS
46.75
(#29 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
60-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+800

CFP CHAMPION
150-1

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	27.1	63	22.1	26
YARDS PER POINT	14.1	61	15.3	35
PLAYS PER GAME	72.3	26		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:52	8		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	45.0%	22	30.1%	5
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	381.4	62	338	28
YARDS PER PLAY	5.3	86	5.5	68
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	40	24		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	163.4	59	143.8	51
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.1	79	4.3	68
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30.2	71		
COMPLETION %	60.8%	70	61.6%	72
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	218	73	194.2	31
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.2	70	7.5	76
TURNOVERS	0.7	4	1.3	80

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

53.5 CONFERENCE: #12 of 16
NATIONAL: #27 of 136

Eli Drinkwitz failed to produce a winning record in his first three years at Missouri, but the past two years were a much different story. Drinkwitz went 11-2 in 2023 and 10-3 last season, capping each season with a bowl victory over a Big Ten opponent. The Tigers had talent and a lot of it. Drinkwitz now must coach up a new team. While three-year starting quarterback Brady Cook and star receiver Luther Burden III are off to the NFL, Drinkwitz appears to have hit paydirt in the transfer portal on both sides of the ball. The most important factor in Missouri's success this season might be a schedule that is arguably the softest in the SEC.

OFFENSE

Penn State transfer Beau Pribula is favored to win a quarterback competition against Sam Horn. Pribula displayed promising dual-threat abilities for the Nittany Lions as a backup. Cook, who won 20 games as the starter the past two years, went undrafted and signed with the Jets. Burden, a second-round pick by the Bears, is expected to be replaced by Mississippi State transfer Kevin Coleman. Of all the transfers, running back Ahmad Hardy is the best bet to put up big numbers. Hardy led all freshmen with 1,351 yards rushing last season at UL Monroe. Hardy is not out of his league and should be one of the top runners in the SEC. The line is somewhat of a concern with only two returning starters, but it looks good on paper.

DEFENSE

Georgia transfer Damon Wilson II will start on one end and senior Zion Young returns to handle the other end. Wilson and Young headline an outstanding defensive front. Josiah Trotter, who starred as a freshman at West Virginia, and returning senior Triston Newson lead the linebackers. UNLV transfer Jalen Catalon will start at safety and should be a major contributor. A defense that ranked 20th in scoring (20.3 ppg) is deep and could be even better this season.

OUTLOOK

Drinkwitz reloaded with a great group of transfers. Pribula, Hardy, Coleman, Wilson, Trotter and Catalon will be difference-makers for the Tigers. It's not fair to say the schedule is easy because this is the SEC and Alabama and South Carolina are on the schedule, but Missouri is the envy of all other teams in the league. Six teams had losing records in conference play last season, and five of those are on Missouri's schedule. The Tigers will host the Crimson Tide and Gamecocks. To top it off, Drinkwitz gets his first six games at home. This could be a sleeper team.

prediction

OVER 7 WINS

OKLAHOMA
SOONERS

Head Coach: Brent Venables (4th)
2024 Record: 6-7 SU & 6-6-1 ATS, 6-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

15 OFFENSE: 7
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	ILLINOIS ST	-35.8	25.5
9/6	MICHIGAN	-0.4	60
9/13	at Temple	-29	26.5
9/20	AUBURN	-4.3	57
10/4	KENT ST	-46.2	15.5
10/11	vs. Texas	+8.1	69.5
10/18	at South Carolina	+2.7	58
10/25	OLE MISS	+1.8	63
11/1	at Tennessee	+4.6	59.5
11/15	at Alabama	+12.2	67.5
11/22	MISSOURI	-7.8	53.5
11/29	LSU	+1	62.5

SOS
50.74
(#6 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/-0.4
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
28-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+550

CFP CHAMPION
65-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	21.1	110	22.2	27
YARDS PER POINT	14.4	71	14.6	67
PLAYS PER GAME	72.2	30		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:55	96		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	34.8%	110	37.0%	43
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	303.2	126	323.9	19
YARDS PER PLAY	4.2	131	4.8	21
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	39	30		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	136.1	83	115.8	18
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.5	112	3.1	8
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	29	80		
COMPLETION %	62.6%	47	61.0%	66
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	167.1	121	208.1	43
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	5.8	129	7.6	83
TURNOVERS	1.7	99	1.7	29

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

58.5 CONFERENCE: #9 of 16
NATIONAL: #16 of 136

Sometimes a great coordinator does not make the transition to being a great head coach, and Brent Venables has been another example of that. Venables has a 22-17 record in three years at Oklahoma, but that includes two losing seasons. Venables seemed to gain traction with a late-season 24-3 upset of Alabama, yet what followed was a blowout loss at LSU and bowl loss to Navy. The Sooners bottomed out by hitting a three-game losing streak in the middle of last season, including a 34-3 whipping by Texas. It's darkest before dawn, and changes are coming, starting with a new quarterback, running back and offensive coordinator. If the changes don't work, Venables' shaky job status could be the next thing to change.

OFFENSE
It's mostly up to John Mateer to steer the Sooner Schooner wagon in the right direction. Mateer was a wanted man in the transfer portal after a huge year at Washington State, where he passed for 3,139 yards and 29 touchdowns and ran for 826 yards and 15 touchdowns. Mateer's 44 total touchdowns tied for No. 1 in the nation. Venables also hired Ben Arbuckle away from Washington State. Arbuckle and Mateer teamed to lead the Cougars to 36.6 ppg, the sixth-best scoring offense in the country. Another impact addition is running back Jaydn Ott, a transfer from Cal who's a legit star. Deion Burks headlines a receiving corps with questions, and the line was a weakness a year ago, so some concerns remain. Still, expect a significant jump from the Sooners' 24 ppg, which ranked 97th nationally.

DEFENSE
Venables calls the defense, which always will be his strength. He's not a good clock and game manager, but Kevin Wilson has returned to the staff as an analyst to assist with those duties. Senior end R Mason Thomas and junior linebacker Kip Lewis will be leaders for a unit that will miss NFL draft picks Danny Stutsman and Billy Bowman.

OUTLOOK
For the second straight year, Oklahoma drew a bad hand when the SEC dealt the schedule cards. The Sooners, who host Michigan on Sept. 6, will pack their bags for road trips to Alabama, South Carolina and Tennessee in addition to games against Texas, Auburn, Mississippi and LSU. Still, there is real hope the Sooners can handle the scheduling grind due to the arrival of Mateer and Ott in Arbuckle's new-look offense. Venables went 10-3 in 2023, a win total that is not going to be matched this year, but Oklahoma could win eight games. Seven wins seems slightly more likely, so look Under 7.5 (-140) at Circa Sports.

prediction

UNDER 7.5 WINS

OLE MISS
REBELS

Head Coach: Lane Kiffin (6th)
2024 Record: 10-3 SU & 8-5 ATS, 3-10 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

12
OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 6

schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	GEORGIA ST	-36.7	29
9/6	at Kentucky	-12.5	48
9/13	ARKANSAS	-13.3	52
9/20	TULANE	-19.8	45.5
9/27	LSU	-3.7	62.5
10/11	WASHINGTON ST	-30.5	35
10/18	at Georgia	+8.1	68.5
10/25	at Oklahoma	-1.8	58.5
11/1	SOUTH CAROLINA	-7.7	58
11/8	THE CITADEL	-53.6	12.5
11/15	FLORIDA	-6.9	59.5
11/28	at Mississippi St	-16.7	44

SOS
46.74
(#30 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.9/0
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
16-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+175

CFP CHAMPION
45-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	35.5	10	15.6	4
YARDS PER POINT	14.3	66	20.7	1
PLAYS PER GAME	73.2	20		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:19	109		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	40.7%	57	33.0%	13
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	506.2	2	322.9	17
YARDS PER PLAY	6.9	2	4.4	4
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	38.5	33		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	170.2	47	85.1	1
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.4	58	2.4	1
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.4	47		
COMPLETION %	68.4%	15	60.1%	48
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	336	3	237.8	91
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	10.4	2	6.9	43
TURNOVERS	1.1	32	1.8	17

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

63.0 CONFERENCE: #4 of 16
NATIONAL: #9 of 136

Which team finished in the nation's top three in scoring offense and defense last season yet missed the 12-team playoff? The answer is obviously Mississippi, which went 9-3 in the regular season. Lane Kiffin did lots of complaining and whining about not being selected for the playoffs, but the blame falls on him for losing 20-17 to Kentucky as a 15-point home favorite. The Wildcats finished 1-7 in SEC play, by the way. Kiffin has only five starters returning and must replace quarterback Jaxson Dart, a first-round pick by the Giants. Kiffin hit the transfer portal to reload, and he's got a quarterback who's ready to step in and trigger the offense.

OFFENSE

Redshirt sophomore Austin Simmons could be Kiffin's next great QB. The 6-foot-4 lefty attempted only 32 passes last season, though he did get some important playing time and led a touchdown drive in the Rebels' 28-10 victory over Georgia. Cayden Lee is the top returning receiver, with stars Tre Harris and Jordan Watkins off to the NFL. Kiffin brought in transfers to fill the gaps at receiver and to rebuild a line that lost four starters. The running back depth looks good, headlined by senior Logan Diggs. It's unrealistic to expect the No. 3 scoring offense (38.6 ppg) from a year ago to reappear. The skill positions are impressive, but the line could be a problem.

DEFENSE

Defensive tackle Walter Nolen was the 16th overall pick by the Cardinals and the anchor of an Ole Miss defense that ranked No. 2 in scoring (14.4 ppg). Nolen was one of five Rebels defenders who were drafted. Junior linebacker Suntarine Perkins tied for the team lead with 10.5 sacks and will spearhead this unit. Veteran coordinator Pete Golding has a puzzle to put together, and Nebraska transfer end Princewill Umanmielen is a new piece to watch. Oscar Bird, a freshman punter from Australia, is intriguing.

OUTLOOK

With a loaded roster on both sides of the ball last year, Kiffin blew it. The loss to Kentucky was inexcusable. This team has potential, but it's not nearly as experienced or talented. The Rebels host LSU in late September and the going gets tougher by mid-October with road games against Georgia and Oklahoma and a home date with South Carolina. The schedule is favorable due to Alabama and Texas not being on it, so Kiffin's crew has a chance to overachieve if Simmons grows up early and operates another high-scoring offense. Whether Ole Miss wins eight or nine is a coin flip.

prediction
OVER 8.5 WINS

SOUTH CAROLINA
GAMECOCKS

Head Coach: Shane Beamer (5th)
2024 Record: 9-4 SU & 9-4 ATS, 7-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

12 OFFENSE: 7 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 5

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/31	vs. Virginia Tech	-11.9	49
9/6	S CAROLINA ST	-41.9	19
9/13	VANDERBILT	-12.7	48
9/20	at Missouri	-2.1	53.5
9/27	KENTUCKY	-12.5	48
10/11	at LSU	+7.4	62.5
10/18	OKLAHOMA	-2.7	58.5
10/25	ALABAMA	+6.3	67.5
11/1	at Ole Miss	+7.7	63
11/15	at Texas A&M	+4.7	60
11/22	COASTAL CAROLINA	-27.6	33.5
11/29	CLEMSON	+2.6	63.5

SOS
51.11
(#4 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.8/0.2
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
25-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+500

CFP CHAMPION
60-1

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	28.3	51	18.6	11
YARDS PER POINT	13.8	56	17.4	10
PLAYS PER GAME	71.1	39		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:04	35		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	40.1%	63	36.8%	41
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	391.1	54	322.5	16
YARDS PER PLAY	5.5	70	4.7	13
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	42.1	11		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	177.7	35	119.3	24
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.2	71	3.4	16
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	25.8	113		
COMPLETION %	63.6%	38	57.9%	28
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	213.4	80	203.2	39
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.3	21	6.7	34
TURNOVERS	1.6	83	2	8

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

58.0 CONFERENCE: #10 of 16
NATIONAL: #17 of 136

If you like to bet on a reliable coach-quarterback combo, this is a team for you. The Shane Beamer-LaNorris Sellers duo is dynamic. Beamer went 9-4 last year and continues to prove he's a rising star as a coach. Sellers was so impressive as a redshirt freshman that he's already one of the top three quarterback prospects in next year's draft. South Carolina was close to being a playoff team, but narrow losses to LSU and Alabama meant a lesser trip to the Citrus Bowl. While Beamer must replace a lot of talent that departed for the NFL, he's still got Sellers for another season, so the ceiling is high.

OFFENSE

Sellers is a 6-foot-3, 240-pound stud with a strong arm and superb athletic ability. He passed for 2,534 yards, rushed for 674 yards and totaled 25 touchdowns. Those numbers are about to take a big leap, health permitting, and Sellers' durability is obviously a key to the season. Sellers suffered an ankle injury when the Gamecocks squandered a 17-0 lead and lost 36-33 to LSU. Leading rusher Raheim "Rocket" Sanders, who went undrafted and signed with the Chargers, will be replaced by Rahsul Faison, a transfer from Utah State. The receivers look promising and the line has depth. One wrinkle is a new coordinator as Mike Shula takes over for Dowell Loggains, now the head coach at Appalachian State.

DEFENSE

A defense that ranked 12th in scoring (18.1 ppg) lost six players, including three on the line, to the NFL Draft. Sophomore end Dylan Stewart and junior corner Jalon Kilgore should be among the top defensive players in the conference. It's tough to replace most of the line and the starting linebackers and maintain such a high level of play.

OUTLOOK

The Gamecocks open against Virginia Tech in Atlanta on Aug. 31, followed by September games against South Carolina State, Vanderbilt, Missouri and Kentucky. Beamer must start at least 4-1 for his team to have a realistic chance to reach lofty goals. A five-game stretch starting in mid-October is about as rough as it gets with road trips to LSU, Mississippi and Texas A&M in addition to home games against Alabama and Oklahoma. Sellers is a rising star, a Superman of sorts, and a quarterback of his caliber will give the Gamecocks a shot to win every game. Beamer is a bet-on coach, yet with holes to fill on defense and special teams, South Carolina will come up short of the playoffs again. The win total is 7.5 (Under -150) at DraftKings and 7 (Over -135) at Circa Sports.

prediction

UNDER 7.5 WINS

TENNESSEE
VOLUNTEERS

Head Coach: Josh Heupel (5th)
2024 Record: 10-3 SU & 7-6 ATS, 8-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

12 OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 8

SOS
45.63
(#37 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3.2/-0.2
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
25-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+300

CFP CHAMPION
60-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	32.9	26	17.2	8
YARDS PER POINT	12.9	26	17.4	9
PLAYS PER GAME	74.6	9		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:37	79		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	46.2%	13	32.3%	9
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	424.9	30	298.7	7
YARDS PER PLAY	5.7	55	4.5	5
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	44.8	4		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	220	11	106.3	10
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.9	27	3	5
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	27.4	100		
COMPLETION %	61.4%	65	59.1%	40
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	204.9	93	192.3	27
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.5	54	6.5	27
TURNOVERS	1.2	38	1.7	29

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

59.5 CONFERENCE: #7 of 16
NATIONAL: #14 of 136

The thrill of making the trip to the College Football Playoff was quickly gone for the Volunteers, who were obliterated 42-17 at Ohio State and then lost their star quarterback in a stunning development. Nico Iamaleava wanted more money and left Tennessee in what could be called a contract dispute. Iamaleava landed at UCLA, which already had a new transfer quarterback. The Vols and Bruins basically traded QBs in a bizarre situation. All of that is in the past. Tennessee coach Josh Heupel will adjust on the fly and try to produce another 10-win season with his fast-paced offense and a defense that was dominant in most games.

OFFENSE

Joey Aguilar passed for 6,759 yards and 56 touchdowns in two seasons at Appalachian State before briefly transferring to UCLA and then changing course to Tennessee. Aguilar, a 6-foot-3 senior with running ability, did throw a total of 24 interceptions in those two years and needs to cut down that number. The Volunteers also must replace running back Dylan Sampson, who rushed for 1,491 yards and 22 touchdowns and was a fourth-round pick by the Browns. DeSean Bishop, who ran for 455 yards and 6.1 per carry, follows in Sampson's footsteps. The line is retooled and will feature Notre Dame transfer Sam Pendleton and five-star freshman David Sanders. Heupel orchestrated the 12th-ranked scoring offense (35.7 ppg) last season, but that average was inflated due to lopsided victories over lightweights Chattanooga (69-3), Kent State (71-0) and UTEP (56-0).

DEFENSE

Edge rusher James Pearce Jr., a first-round pick by the Falcons, led a Volunteers defense that ranked No. 7 in scoring (16.1 ppg). Seven starters return and the talent level will be similar across the board. Senior linemen Dominic Bailey and Bryson Eason, linebacker Arion Carter and cornerback Jermod McCoy will be players to watch.

OUTLOOK

Iamaleava was not great last year, so Aguilar could be a suitable replacement if he picks up Heupel's offense in a hurry. Tennessee caught some scheduling breaks similar to Missouri — six teams had losing records in SEC play last season, and five of those teams are on the Vols' schedule. The Vols host Georgia in September and have dates down the road at Alabama and Florida, but the rest of the schedule is manageable. Heupel has proven he can win at a high level, and now he's got to coach up a new quarterback. Don't count out Tennessee as a potential surprise team, but 8-4 is probably the result.

prediction

UNDER 8.5 WINS

TEXAS
LONGHORNS

Head Coach: Steve Sarkisian (5th)
2024 Record: 13-3 SU & 8-8 ATS, 6-9-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

11 OFFENSE: 4
DEFENSE: 7

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	at Ohio St	+2.8	69
9/6	SAN JOSE ST	-34.9	37.5
9/13	UTEP	-46.6	26
9/20	SAM HOUSTON ST	-43.1	29
10/4	at Florida	-7.2	59.5
10/11	vs. Oklahoma	-14.4	58.5
10/18	at Kentucky	-18.8	48
10/25	at Mississippi St	-23	44
11/1	VANDERBILT	-24.4	48
11/15	at Georgia	+1.8	68.5
11/22	ARKANSAS	-19.9	52
11/28	TEXAS A&M	-13.1	60

SOS
49.43
(#12 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3/-0.2
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+270

MAKE PLAYOFF
-330

CFP CHAMPION
+550

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	33	24	15.3	2
YARDS PER POINT	13.3	42	18.5	5
PLAYS PER GAME	72.6	23		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:52	72		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	42.6%	38	31.4%	7
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	437.6	17	283.7	4
YARDS PER PLAY	6	36	4.2	2
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.4	64		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	158.9	69	109.9	12
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.4	64	3.2	12
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	33.8	36		
COMPLETION %	66.0%	22	59.7%	47
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	278.7	13	173.8	7
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.2	23	5.7	1
TURNOVERS	1.6	87	1.9	11

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

69.5 CONFERENCE: #1 of 16
NATIONAL: #1 of 136

After five years in Austin, Steve Sarkisian has raised the bar to the highest level. The Longhorns reached the SEC title game last year and lost in the CFP semifinals the past two years. Is Arch Manning destined to get Texas over the top? There will be those who believe the "Arch Madness" hype and those who doubt it, yet Manning will be an upgrade the team has needed at quarterback. Sarkisian has recruited well and should be able to fill the holes left by 23 players who were picked in the past two NFL drafts.

OFFENSE
Manning has displayed impressive athletic ability in limited action. He probably should have played more — making two starts and attempting 90 passes last season — but Sarkisian stuck to the plan and went with Quinn Ewers down the stretch. Ewers had some shortcomings, and the NFL made that clear when he slipped to the seventh round of the draft. In the spring, Manning showed off a more muscular frame and improved zip on his passes. He can run and throw accurate deep balls. He's ready. The line in front of him is one question mark. Eight starters, including four linemen, departed from an offense that scored 33 ppg, yet only 17 ppg in two losses to Georgia. Quintrevion Wisner and CJ Baxter are promising running backs. Manning's primary receivers will be DeAndre Moore, Ryan Wingo and Stanford transfer Emmet Mosley.

DEFENSE
The nation's No. 3 scoring defense (15.3 ppg) lost six starters, including cornerback Jahdae Barron, a first-round pick by the Broncos. All four defensive line starters must be replaced, but Sarkisian has recruited plenty of reinforcements and this will be an extremely talented unit on all three levels. Edge rusher Colin Simmons, linebacker Anthony Hill Jr., corner Malik Muhammad and safeties Jelani McDonald and Michael Taaffe are rising stars.

OUTLOOK
It will be difficult for the Longhorns to win 11 regular-season games again, mostly because the schedule is more challenging this time around. In addition to the opener at Ohio State, Texas will play at Florida and Georgia. As always, there is the rivalry meeting with Oklahoma in Dallas, a game the Longhorns won 34-3 a year ago, and the Sooners will put up a better fight this time. If Captain Obvious were a handicapper, he would say the road game against the Buckeyes will go a long way in determining Texas' win total and Manning's Heisman hopes. While that is true, the Longhorns should reach 9-3 and be title contenders even if they lose at Ohio State in late August. Manning is likely the real deal, but betting Over 9.5 wins at -170 is still risky business.

prediction

UNDER 9.5 WINS

TEXAS A&M
AGGIES

Head Coach: Mike Elko (2nd)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 3-10 ATS, 8-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

15
OFFENSE: 8 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 7

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	TX-SAN ANTONIO	-21.4	41.5
9/6	UTAH ST	-33.5	29.5
9/13	at Notre Dame	+9.2	65.5
9/27	AUBURN	-6	57
10/4	MISSISSIPPI ST	-18.8	44
10/11	FLORIDA	-3.9	59.5
10/18	at Arkansas	-5.2	52
10/25	at LSU	+6.2	62.5
11/8	at Missouri	-3.3	53.5
11/15	SOUTH CAROLINA	-4.7	58
11/22	SAMFORD	-45.8	17
11/28	at Texas	+13.1	69.5

SOS
50.49
(#8 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.9/-0.6
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
15-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+215

CFP CHAMPION
45-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	28.6	50	23.3	39
YARDS PER POINT	13.8	59	16.1	18
PLAYS PER GAME	70.6	49		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:50	25		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	44.3%	25	34.3%	25
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	395.8	52	374.7	63
YARDS PER PLAY	5.6	63	5.4	55
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	40.7	15		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	184.3	30	131.4	33
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.5	48	3.9	41
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28	92		
COMPLETION %	59.5%	84	53.3%	4
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	211.5	84	243.3	96
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.6	50	7.2	58
TURNOVERS	1.3	46	1.5	48

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

60.0 CONFERENCE: #6 of 16
NATIONAL: #12 of 136

Maybe some expectations for Texas A&M were too high in coach Mike Elko's first season. Elko arrived from Duke and energized a fan base that annually wants to compete for championships. In college football, teams don't win conference titles and make playoff appearances without an elite quarterback. The Aggies didn't have a star quarterback last year and still don't, but Marcel Reed is only a sophomore and still is maturing. Texas A&M lost four of its final five games to finish 8-5. A 17-7 loss to Texas in College Station was especially disappointing because the Longhorns stumbled through most of the game while the Aggies blew several chances to pull the upset.

OFFENSE

Senior running back Le'Veon Moss and an experienced, massive line will be the Aggies' strength. Moss finished the season with 765 rushing yards (6.3 per carry) and 10 touchdowns, yet he was unable to stay healthy and that must change. Texas A&M went 7-1 with Moss and 1-4 without him after a season-ending injury. Three senior starters return on a line that is led by 6-foot-7, 320-pound left tackle Trey Zuhn. The Aggies' main quarterbacks, Reed and Conner Weigman, combined for 18 touchdown passes and 11 interceptions. Reed totaled 22 touchdowns, including seven on the ground, and he's got dual-threat ability that could shine if he develops. Reed will have better receivers to target, including transfers KC Concepcion (North Carolina State) and Mario Craver (Mississippi State). Moss and Reed should lead a high-scoring offense.

DEFENSE

Elko returns eight starters from a solid defense that allowed 22.2 ppg. However, the three starters who left for the NFL — first-round pick Shemar Stewart and second-rounders Nic Scourton and Shemar Turner — will be missed. Senior linemen Cashius Howell and Albert Regis and veteran linebackers Scooby Williams and Taurean York will lead the front.

OUTLOOK

The Aggies dropped a 23-13 decision to Notre Dame in Elko's debut at home before reeling off a seven-game win streak. The season ended with a 35-31 loss to USC in the Las Vegas Bowl. The schedule is a little tougher this year as Texas A&M faces the Fighting Irish on the road in September prior to trips to LSU, Missouri and Texas. The most difficult home tests will be against Florida and South Carolina. Elko can win eight games again, but that's probably the ceiling unless Reed turns into a star and that's possible. This team has potential, and while the quarterback play will determine if the Aggies overachieve, they have typically underachieved.

prediction

UNDER 8.5 WINS

VANDERBILT
COMMODORES

Head Coach: Clark Lea (5th)
2024 Record: 7-6 SU & 9-4 ATS, 7-5-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

17 OFFENSE: 9 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 8

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	CHARLESTON SOUT	-44.9	5.5
9/6	at Virginia Tech	+3.5	49
9/13	at South Carolina	+12.7	58
9/20	GEORGIA ST	-20.9	29
9/27	UTAH ST	-20.7	29.5
10/4	at Alabama	+22.2	67.5
10/18	LSU	+12.1	62.5
10/25	MISSOURI	+3.3	53.5
11/1	at Texas	+24.4	69.5
11/8	AUBURN	+6.8	57
11/22	KENTUCKY	-1.8	48
11/29	at Tennessee	+14.6	59.5

SOS
48.94
(#16 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.1/0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
200-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
30-1

CFP CHAMPION
500-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	25	78	25.3	60
YARDS PER POINT	12.7	22	15.9	23
PLAYS PER GAME	59.8	131		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:02	39		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	43.4%	30	49.7%	131
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	317.5	118	401.9	86
YARDS PER PLAY	5.3	83	6.3	110
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36	68		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	132.3	89	149.2	57
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.7	102	4.5	76
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	22.4	127		
COMPLETION %	62.5%	50	75.6%	134
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	185.2	109	252.8	111
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.3	22	8.9	126
TURNOVERS	0.6	1	1.2	96

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

48.0 CONFERENCE: #14 of 16
NATIONAL: #44 of 136

Clark Lea and Diego Pavia authored college football's top feel-good story last season, leading Vanderbilt to an upset of Alabama and a 7-6 finish with a bowl win. To put that in perspective, the Commodores went 2-10 in 2023 and were 2-22 in SEC play in Lea's first three years as coach in Nashville. Pavia is the ultimate underdog quarterback, an undersized 6-foot grinder who started his career in the middle of nowhere. In July, Lea and Pavia showed up at the SEC media days in Atlanta and made bold statements about what this team can do. Is Vanderbilt headed for back-to-back bowls?

OFFENSE
Pavia sued the NCAA for an extra, sixth year of eligibility and won. He spent 2020 and 2021 at New Mexico Military Institute and the following two years at New Mexico State. In his first year at Vanderbilt, Pavia totaled 3,093 total yards (2,293 passing, 800 rushing) and 28 touchdowns with four interceptions. After the Commodores' 40-35 victory over Alabama, which was a 23-point favorite, Pavia put a scare into Texas in a 27-24 loss. He blossomed in coordinator Tim Beck's spread-option offense. Junior running back Sedrick Alexander also returns along with the team's top pass catchers, tight end Eli Stowers and receiver Junior Sherrill. Senior guard Chase Mitchell is the lone returning starter on a line that is being rebuilt with transfers.

DEFENSE
Lea was the Notre Dame defensive coordinator before taking the Vanderbilt job, but his defenses were unimpressive until last year. The Commodores surrendered 36.2 ppg in 2023 and cut that number all the way to 23.4 ppg in 2024. Eight starters are back, led by junior linebacker Bryan Longwell, so Lea should have another solid defense.

OUTLOOK
Pavia recently made an outlandish comment at SEC media days, saying, "Going 7-6 wasn't good enough. I came back because I want to win a national championship." Setting high goals is great, but a national title is wildly unrealistic. Lea doubled down by saying, "We believe we have what it takes to play into January." Those lines would be a big hit in a comedy club. The Commodores will face Alabama, South Carolina, Texas and Tennessee on the road, in addition to LSU and Missouri at home, so good luck with those playoff dreams. Vanderbilt's rise from the conference cellar was worthy of a movie script and the sequel season will be intriguing. Winning seven regular-season games would be another huge success, and six would be just fine.

prediction

OVER 5.5 WINS

SUN BELT
preview

Coverage by
Adam Burke

The Sun Belt, or as I call it, the Fun Belt, is the only conference in FBS college football that still uses divisions. It may also get a little less fun next year, as Texas State leaves for the rebirth of the Pac-12 and Louisiana Tech joins as the 14th member of the conference. For now, though, it is business as usual for the teams in the conference and it looks like we are in line for a fascinating season.

Last year's Sun Belt Championship Game featured Marshall and Louisiana. The Ragin' Cajuns have a chance to go back. The Thundering Herd look nothing like last season's team. So, we're extremely likely to have a new division champ in the East and could have a real battle in the West, which has historically been the weaker of the two divisions, but has ramped up recently.

James Madison is lined as the clear favorite to win the East, while we have five teams that are given a pretty good chance by the oddsmakers in the West, including three that have identical prices as we look ahead to the start of the 2025 season. As far as the conference winner as a whole, the path for the Dukes looks easier than the path for any team from the West, so JMU is the clear-cut choice as of now.

But, this is a conference that still has a ton of talent, even though SEC, ACC, and Big 12 teams poach Sun Belt standouts on an annual basis. It is also a conference with some new sideline bosses, though a relatively low turnover rate compared to other Group of Five leagues. Former South Carolina OC Dowell Loggains is the new head coach at App State, while Charles Huff moved from Huntington to Hattiesburg with a switch from Marshall to Southern Miss, and longtime West Virginia and NC State assistant Tony Gibson took over the Herd.

The Sun Belt is often a forgotten conference by bettors with all the SEC and ACC teams in the area, but don't sleep on this league and the betting opportunities that it presents.

2025 projected standings

TEAM	2024 SM PR	HOME FA	ROAD FA	SS (RANK)	ALL PRJW'S	ALL PRJL'S	CONF PRJW'S	CONF PRJL'S	DRAFTKINGS O/U
EAST DIVISION									
JAMES MADISON	42	3.6	0.4	34.84 (92)	8.2	3.8	5.8	2.2	7.5
GA SOUTHERN	37.5	2.9	-0.4	33.98 (102)	7.0	5.0	4.8	3.2	7.5
OLD DOMINION	35	2.7	0.4	36.13 (79)	5.8	6.2	4.3	3.7	6.5
APPALACHIAN ST	33	2.6	-0.4	33.03 (111)	6.0	6.0	3.8	4.2	5.5
COASTAL CAROLINA	33.5	2.5	-0.3	35.05 (88)	5.4	6.6	3.7	4.3	5.5
MARSHALL	32	2.4	0.3	35.09 (87)	5.5	6.5	3.2	4.8	5.5
GEORGIA ST	29	1.9	0.2	36.95 (74)	3.7	8.3	2.5	5.5	3.5
WEST DIVISION									
LA LAFAYETTE	38.5	3	0.2	33.13 (110)	7.6	4.4	4.9	3.1	7.5
S ALABAMA	37	3	-0.1	34 (101)	6.8	5.2	4.9	3.1	7.5
TEXAS ST UNIV	38	2.8	-0.3	34.72 (94)	6.9	5.1	4.7	3.3	7.5
TROY	35	2.6	0.4	35.21 (86)	6.1	5.9	4.3	3.7	5.5
ARKANSAS ST	33.5	2.6	-0.5	34.95 (89)	5.6	6.4	3.7	4.3	5.5
SOUTHERN MISS	30	2.2	-0.5	34.12 (100)	4.7	7.3	2.8	5.2	4.5
LA MONROE	28.5	3	-0.4	35.47 (82)	4.2	7.8	2.6	5.4	4.5

APPALACHIAN STATE
MOUNTAINEERS

Head Coach: Dowell Loggains (1st)
2024 Record: 5-6 SU & 3-7-1 ATS, 2-8-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

7 OFFENSE: 2
DEFENSE: 5

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/29	vs. Charlotte	-9.4	25.5
9/6	LINDENWOOD	-24.2	11.5
9/13	at Southern Miss	-0.4	30
9/27	at Boise St	+21.3	51
10/4	OREGON ST	+3.4	39.5
10/11	at Georgia St	-1.7	29
10/18	COASTAL CAROLINA	-2.4	33.5
10/25	at Old Dominion	+5.1	35
11/6	GA SOUTHERN	+1.5	37.5
11/15	at James Madison	+13	42
11/22	MARSHALL	-3.3	32
11/29	ARKANSAS ST	-2.6	33.5

SOS
33.03
(#111 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/-0.4
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
20-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
75-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	25.5	75	35.2	118
YARDS PER POINT	16.4	109	12	123
PLAYS PER GAME	72.6	24		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:17	56		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	42.4%	40	47.4%	120
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	419.4	33	423.5	105
YARDS PER PLAY	5.8	46	6.5	118
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.5	75		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	151.8	75	199.4	116
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.3	70	5.4	123
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.6	26		
COMPLETION %	55.1%	117	69.9%	129
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	267.6	18	224.1	68
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.5	52	8.6	118
TURNOVERS	2.2	132	1.3	75

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

33.0 CONFERENCE: #10 of 14
NATIONAL: #103 of 136

The boys from Boone needed a fresh start and Dowell Loggains will attempt to provide it. The former NFL position coach and South Carolina OC has been tasked with returning to the standards that this proud program has had over the last decade-plus. App State is 93-36 since joining the Sun Belt and 62-22 in conference play. But, last season's team went just 5-6 and had a losing season in SBC games for the second time in three years.

Shawn Clark went back to being a position coach at a Power Four program and that opened the door for Loggains to get his first crack at being a HC. He'll call his own plays with a pretty good set of talented transfers, but basically a brand-new roster as the program rebuilds.

OFFENSE
AJ Swann and JJ Kohl couldn't crack the depth charts at LSU and Iowa State, but those are not easy gigs to take over at the QB position. Both find themselves in Boone, as Swann did get some starts for Vanderbilt in 2023 and Kohl, who stands 6-foot-7 and was a four-star QB out of Ankeny High School in Iowa, will see the field this season. The 44-year-old Loggains did a pretty good job with a Power Five transfer by the name of Spencer Rattler and also ran last year's Gamecocks offense with LaNorris Sellers.

Running back transfers from Arkansas and Tennessee join wide receivers all looking for a fresh start. The WR position is the one with the most question marks, but this is a new offensive installation, so returning production may have been overrated anyway. With an inexperienced offensive line, Swann and Kohl will have to be creative and I bet we see a lot of quick throws.

DEFENSE
DJ Smith is back after a three-year stint with Missouri. He played at App State in the late 2000s and now gets a homecoming with a group that badly needs to improve in a few key areas. The Mountaineers only had 13 takeaways in 11 games. Moreover, only four of those 13 takeaways were interceptions. Only New Mexico, Akron, and Central Michigan had fewer picks. In all, App State was -12 in interception margin.

The other area the Mountaineers fell off is on the sack front, as they had 12 fewer sacks, leading to 0.8 more yards per play for the opposition. It was an egregiously bad performance with 6.5 yards per play allowed, easily the most in App State's FBS tenure. Four of the top six tacklers are back, but obviously new personnel and a new voice have to help.

OUTLOOK
The Mountaineers look like a team ready to turn it around quickly. There is a lot of talent here, but this may be a team that looks better without finishing that much better in the standings. They play at James Madison and Old Dominion, plus they play at Boise State in non-conference. Their last two games are two of the easiest, though, and bowl eligibility is likely to be hanging in the balance.

prediction
OVER 5.5 WINS

ARKANSAS STATE
RED WOLVES

Head Coach: Butch Jones (5th)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 6-7 ATS, 7-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

8 OFFENSE: 5 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 3

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	SE MISSOURI ST	-17.6	18.5
9/6	vs. Arkansas	+16.5	52
9/13	IOWA ST	+15.5	51.5
9/20	at Kennesaw St	-8.3	22.5
9/27	at La Monroe	-1.5	28.5
10/4	TEXAS ST UNIV	+1.6	38
10/14	at S Alabama	+7	37
10/25	GA SOUTHERN	+1	37.5
11/1	at Troy	+4.6	35
11/8	SOUTHERN MISS	-6.6	30
11/20	LA LAFAYETTE	+2.6	38.5
11/29	at Appalachian St	+2.6	33

SOS
34.95
(#89 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/-0.5
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
25-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
75-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	25.2	77	32.3	108
YARDS PER POINT	15.1	87	14.4	73
PLAYS PER GAME	72.3	28		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:45	99		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	39.2%	72	48.3%	125
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	379.4	66	464.6	124
YARDS PER PLAY	5.3	88	6.7	129
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.7	60		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	159.4	68	210.5	121
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.3	65	5.6	130
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.9	44		
COMPLETION %	63.3%	41	63.5%	96
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	220	72	254.1	112
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.7	102	8.5	116
TURNOVERS	1.3	50	1.7	29

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
33.5 CONFERENCE: #9 of 14
NATIONAL: #101 of 136

The 2024 season was a big one for Arkansas State. Butch Jones put all the proper pieces together and scored his first bowl win and winning record in appropriately-named Jonesboro. After a very unimpressive win over Central Arkansas to begin the season, the 8-5 ending was not something that many people expected. Seven of the Red Wolves' eight wins were by seven or fewer points and four of those were by four or fewer points.

Interestingly, three of the five losses were by 45, 32, and 36 points, so the statistical profile for the team was pretty skewed and a little tough to decipher. Nevertheless, it was the fourth straight season with an improved record for Jones, who basically tore it all down and started over during his 2-10 first season in 2021.

OFFENSE
In the NIL era, keeping a QB like Jaylen Raynor is not easy. Jones is better equipped for the potential of life without Raynor thanks to redshirt freshman Josh Flowers, but this is still Raynor's team for at least this year and maybe more. He has a 33/17 TD/INT ratio over two seasons with a 60.3% completion rate and 5,333 passing yards. He'll likely be the third-leading passer in program history when the 2025 season is done.

So Raynor is a good start and he's mobile enough to get some rushing yards and extend some plays. What also helps is that top target Corey Rucker is back after having 1,053 receiving yards last season, more than double the next highest guy. RB Ja'Quez Cross is the next highest returning pass catcher and he was a better runner on a per-carry basis than the previous guy. This offense should be quite solid as long as the offensive line can gel.

DEFENSE
But, this defense looks like a potential problem area yet again. New DC Griff McCarley was simply promoted from within and this defense gave up 6.9 yards per play last season. Only Ball State, Kent State, and Tulsa were worse in that department. The Red Wolves were also 125th in third-down defense and 130th in TD% allowed in the red zone.

It will be interesting to see if it was a talent issue, scheme issue, play-calling issue, or all of the above. McCarley is one of the youngest coordinators in FBS and was only on the Arkansas State staff for a year before this promotion. Jones said they did an exhaustive search and went with the in-house candidate. So, even though the top returning tackler only had 24 tackles, that's probably not a bad thing.

OUTLOOK
Look, there are a litany of reasons to be skeptical of Arkansas State. They went 8-5 despite being -1.7 in yards per play differential. They won a ton of close games. Regression seems very, very likely. But I think there's enough talent here and I'm encouraged enough about the DC hire to see them getting to six wins.

prediction
OVER 5.5 WINS

COASTAL CAROLINA
CHANTICLEERS

Head Coach: Tim Beck (3rd)
2024 Record: 6-7 SU & 5-8 ATS, 8-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

9 OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 3

schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	at Virginia	+11.9	43
9/6	CHARLESTON SOUT	-30.8	5.5
9/13	EAST CAROLINA	+1	37
9/20	at S Alabama	+6.8	37
10/4	at Old Dominion	+4.5	35
10/11	LA MONROE	-7.9	28.5
10/18	at Appalachian St	+2.4	33
10/30	MARSHALL	-3.7	32
11/8	GEORGIA ST	-6.8	29
11/15	at Ga Southern	+7.2	37.5
11/22	at South Carolina	+27.6	58
11/29	JAMES MADISON	+6.4	42

SOS
35.05
(#88 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.5/-0.3
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
20-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
75-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE RANK
POINTS PER GAME	27.8	56	32.5	109
YARDS PER POINT	13.2	40	13	105
PLAYS PER GAME	65.3	102		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:41	102		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	39.4%	69	44.7%	108
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	366.8	79	421.8	103
YARDS PER PLAY	5.6	60	5.9	90
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.4	65		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	163.8	57	189.8	106
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.5	52	4.8	99
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	27.8	95		
COMPLETION %	55.6%	114	62.1%	78
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	203.1	95	232	80
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.3	63	7.8	89
TURNOVERS	1.4	63	1.8	20

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
33.5 CONFERENCE: #8 of 14
NATIONAL: #100 of 136

An underwhelming 13-12 start for Tim Beck on the heels of all the success that Jamey Chadwell experienced in Conway could come to a head this season. This is Year 3 of a five-year deal for Beck and a bowl streak that dates back five seasons is on the line in 2025. Given that the non-conference slate features road trips to Virginia and South Carolina and the conference slate has visits to Old Dominion, App State, and Georgia Southern, it's a tough road.

Two new coordinators are here, with OC Drew Hollingshead and DC Jeremiah Johnson. Johnson is the more exciting of the two hires after a magnificent season with Louisiana Tech that saw the Bulldogs finish in the top 10 in yards per play allowed. With more than 60 newcomers for the second straight season, more questions exist than answers.

OFFENSE
The first question to answer is who will start at quarterback? MJ Morris is at his third school after stops at NC State and Maryland. Emmett Brown came across the country from San Jose State. Holdover Tad Hudson started the Myrtle Beach Bowl loss to UTSA. At least there are options for Beck and Hollingshead. None of them are particularly proven, but there are options. And picking the right one matters because Hollingshead came over from Western Kentucky where they threw the ball a lot.

In that respect, bringing back three of the top four wide receivers is a good thing. On the whole, the QB play was a disappointment last season, as the team's leading receiver had 33 catches for 574 yards. The running backs collectively had their best season since 2021, but both are gone after averaging 5.8 and 5.3 yards per carry, respectively.

DEFENSE
The defense took a step back last season as well, allowing more than 31 points for the second time in three seasons. The last time it happened because everybody knew Chadwell wanted out and the team sort of mailed it in on that side of the ball. This time it happened because the personnel just wasn't very good. The Chanticleers allowed six yards per play and a second straight season with 4.7 YPC.

Johnson had a phenomenal base defense that allowed just 4.7 YPP and 3.6 YPC at LA Tech. That said, the Bulldogs had a modest total of 17 turnovers and only five were interceptions, as their 12 fumble recoveries tied for sixth nationally. It is a skill to go for the ball, though, so expect Coastal Carolina to try and mimic that success. For all their success against the run, the LT defense still only had 22 sacks.

OUTLOOK
It wouldn't be surprising to see modest improvements on both sides of the ball, but I don't think that gets Coastal Carolina to six wins with this schedule. I think they'll be favored in four games and any slip up there will make it virtually impossible to get to six wins. And if the bowl eligibility streak ends, does Tim Beck's tenure?

prediction
UNDER 5.5 WINS

GEORGIA SOUTHERN
EAGLES

Head Coach: Clay Helton (4th)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 8-4-1 ATS, 6-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

13 OFFENSE: 6 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 7

SOS
33.98
(#102 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.9/-0.4
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+700

MAKE PLAYOFF
25-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	26.8	66	28.8	83
YARDS PER POINT	13.7	53	15.2	36
PLAYS PER GAME	68.9	69		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:43	42		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	45.0%	21	47.8%	121
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	366.8	81	437.8	114
YARDS PER PLAY	5.3	81	6.5	121
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.3	89		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	126.8	94	174.8	95
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.7	101	5	106
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.3	50		
COMPLETION %	70.3%	11	68.0%	126
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	240	48	263	118
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.4	59	8.5	115
TURNOVERS	1.8	116	1.5	48

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

37.5 CONFERENCE: #4 of 14
NATIONAL: #84 of 136

It used to be pretty common to believe that new coaching hires would break through in Year 3. It's much harder nowadays to establish continuity within a program and have that upward trajectory. Perhaps that's what we're seeing at Georgia Southern, though, as Clay Helton's Eagles had a couple of 6-7 seasons in 2022 and 2023 before bumping up to 8-5 last season.

While they did lose a bowl game for the third straight time under Helton, Georgia Southern's 6-2 record in Sun Belt play matched the number of wins from his first two seasons. That said, Georgia Southern was still nearly -0.4 yards per play in conference games, and gave up more yards per play to losing teams (6.44) than winning teams (6.43) over the same number of regular season games (6).

OFFENSE

JC French is Helton's first returning starter at QB, hence some of the optimism around the team. Of course, he also put up the worst numbers of the QBs in Helton's seasons in Statesboro with just a 17/11 TD/INT ratio. French has now played 23 games under Helton, so he does know the offense inside and out, but the team had its worst performance in YPP, PPG, and YPC in 2024 with that Helton offense.

The Eagles have to replace leading rusher Jalen White, who had 13 rushing TD while nobody else had more than four, though new starter OJ Arnold was better on a per-carry basis. Top WR Derwin Burgess also moved on, but the No. 2 and No. 3 catchers are back. Still, while it is easy to get excited about the returning production here, especially relative to other teams in the division, the ceiling seems a lot lower for this group than Helton's 2022 and 2023 ones.

DEFENSE

Third-year DC Brandon Bailey does bring back quite a bit, though top tackler Marques Watson-Trent and his 118 stops are gone after winning the conference's Defensive Player of the Year award. This defense wasn't any better than the two previous ones and actually regressed from Bailey's first year. At least they had 19 takeaways, including 13 interceptions, to offset the offense's inability to protect the ball.

The secondary looks good again, but a pass rush will be tough to come by yet again. In Helton's three seasons, the Eagles have just 64 sacks and no more than 23 in a season. The defense will have to come together quickly with back-to-back games in California, including one against Helton's old employer at the Coliseum in LA.

OUTLOOK

I don't see the hype from other publications on this team. There are returning starters, including the QB, but he's a pedestrian QB at best. The Eagles play at James Madison and at App State, plus they also face some improved teams at home. There are a lot of toss-up games on the schedule, but I don't like this team much.

prediction

UNDER 7.5 WINS

GEORGIA STATE
PANTHERS

Head Coach: Dell McGee (2nd)
2024 Record: 3-9 SU & 3-8-1 ATS, 6-5-1 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

10 OFFENSE: 6 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 4

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	at Ole Miss	+36.7	63
9/6	MEMPHIS	+12.5	43.5
9/13	MURRAY ST	-30.2	1.5
9/20	at Vanderbilt	+20.9	48
10/4	JAMES MADISON	+11.5	42
10/11	APPALACHIAN ST	+1.7	33
10/18	at Ga Southern	+11.2	37.5
10/23	S ALABAMA	+6	37
11/8	at Coastal Carolina	+6.8	33.5
11/15	MARSHALL	+1.4	32
11/22	at Troy	+8.4	35
11/29	at Old Dominion	+8.5	35

SCHEDULE

SOS
36.95
(#74 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
1.9/0.2
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
50-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
150-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

ODDS

2024 STATS

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	23.8	90	35	116
YARDS PER POINT	16.3	108	12.2	119
PLAYS PER GAME	69.3	63		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:38	78		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	34.7%	112	45.1%	110
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	388.8	55	428.7	109
YARDS PER PLAY	5.6	61	6.1	104
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	30	116		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	131.5	91	222.5	127
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.4	62	5.4	121
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.4	19		
COMPLETION %	59.6%	83	63.7%	98
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	257.4	35	206.2	42
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.9	88	7.6	80
TURNOVERS	1.6	88	1.3	76

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

29.0 CONFERENCE: #13 of 14
NATIONAL: #114 of 136

Were you wondering what Hue Jackson is doing? As a Browns fan who endured his 1-33 stretch in 2016-17, I was not. But if you were, I'm pleased to tell you that he is Georgia State's new offensive coordinator, as the Panthers look to bounce back from a down year. First-year head coach Dell McGee had a rough 3-9 campaign in his rookie season in Atlanta, but there were some shocking positives. Namely, two of the three wins were Vanderbilt and Texas State in a blowout.

McGee took over pretty late in the process with limited access to the portal last season and that's a big reason why he was hired, as he was the run game coordinator and running backs coach at Georgia. So a portal presence would have been helpful. Well, he had one this winter.

OFFENSE
The Browns going 1-15 and then 0-16 on Jackson's watch wasn't all his fault, as his QBs were Cody Kessler, DeShone Kizer, Josh McCown, Kevin Hogan, Robert Griffin III, and Charlie Whitehurst. The 59-year-old has been coaching at the college level since 2021 and was actually Grambling's head coach for two seasons, where they went 8-14. Anyway, he's a football lifer and this offense had 23.8 PPG last season, so improvement seems feasible.

He was the program's assistant GM last season, so he's familiar with the personnel, including returning QB Christian Veilleux. Despite a bunch of other failures, the Panthers did have two backs with well over five yards per carry, but they're both gone. Georgia and Ole Miss transfers will help and shows what McGee is capable of in the portal. The talent level is simply higher across the board.

DEFENSE
McGee also has a new coordinator on defense, as Travis Pearson came over from Troy. Pearson was coaching defensive backs and given that there are no returnees in the secondary, that could be an astute hire. Georgia State actually allowed a 63.2% completion rate that ranked in the bottom 35 last season, but they only allowed 208 passing yards per game.

Only having 18 sacks didn't help and Troy was extremely good at getting to the QB prior to last season, so Pearson could help there. He has a blank slate with a lot of new faces, including a smattering of Power Four players, though not nearly as many as the offense.

OUTLOOK
I think we see Georgia State take some major strides on offense. If the defense can improve at all, this is a far more interesting team than last year's group that went 1-7 in SBC play and gave up 36 PPG. Their schedule is brutal, though. I think we look to bet Overs on a weekly basis with this team early. As far as a win total, four wins looks like the absolute max, as they may only be favored twice.

prediction

UNDER 3.5 WINS

JAMES MADISON
DUKES

Head Coach: Bob Chesney (2nd)
2024 Record: 9-4 SU & 7-6 ATS, 4-9 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

10 OFFENSE: 4 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 6

schedule

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	WEBER ST	-24.5	20.5
9/5	at Louisville	+14.9	54
9/20	at Liberty	+0	40
9/27	GA SOUTHERN	-8.5	37.5
10/4	at Georgia St	-11.5	29
10/11	LA LAFAYETTE	-6.9	38.5
10/18	OLD DOMINION	-10.2	35
10/28	at Texas St Univ	-1.6	38
11/8	at Marshall	-8	32
11/15	APPALACHIAN ST	-13	33
11/22	WASHINGTON ST	-10.2	35
11/29	at Coastal Carolina	-6.4	33.5

SOS
34.84
(#92 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3.6/0.4
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+290

MAKE PLAYOFF
11-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	35	12	21.7	22
YARDS PER POINT	12	8	15.1	44
PLAYS PER GAME	70.7	47		
TIME OF POSSESSION	32:17	17		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	42.2%	43	34.3%	24
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	420.4	32	326.2	21
YARDS PER PLAY	5.9	41	4.9	24
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	40.1	22		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	197.6	19	115.9	19
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.9	26	3.5	18
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28	92		
COMPLETION %	64.9%	30	60.3%	58
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	222.8	65	210.3	45
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8	34	7	47
TURNOVERS	0.8	8	2.3	2

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

42.0 CONFERENCE: #1 of 14
NATIONAL: #67 of 136

The absences of head coach Curt Cignetti, starting QB Jordan McCloud, and others meant that a drop-off for James Madison was inevitable. The 9-4 record after an 11-2 season makes it look worse than it was. Under first-year head coach Bob Chesney, the Dukes scored 0.8 fewer points per game on 0.3 fewer yards per play and allowed one more point per game while actually giving up fewer yards per play.

Of course, the early-season 70-50 game against North Carolina skewed all kinds of metrics. I do think there were some oddities, and maybe even some concerning developments. The Dukes fell to 4-4 in conference play. They were +20 in turnover margin and +7 in conference play. The range of outcomes seems fairly wide this season.

OFFENSE
QB Alonza Barrett is back after posting a 26/4 TD/INT ratio and seven additional rushing touchdowns. OC Dean Kennedy could also have some fun with UNLV transfer Matthew Sluka, who ran for 253 yards and made three starts before an NIL disagreement with the program. The quarterback position is set and so is the running back position with George Pettaway, who had six yards per carry, plus the return of Ayo Adeyi, who was a monster at North Texas.

Unfortunately, the offensive line and the wide receiver room have been picked apart by the portal and graduation. The top returning pass catcher is TE Logan Kyle with 11 grabs. The offensive line has several new faces and that unit allowed 10 more sacks year over year from 2023 to 2024 to begin with.

DEFENSE
Lyle Hemphill left for a job at Texas A&M, so the Dukes picked up Colin Hitschler, who could be an outstanding hire. He's worked under Marcus Freeman, Luke Fickell, and Kalen DeBoer/Kane Wommack the last three seasons. Those are some brilliant defensive minds. I don't think the standards of the JMU defense are going to drop at all with him at the helm.

Hitschler does have to find a pass rusher following the departures of Eric O'Neill (13 sacks) and Khairi Manns (9 sacks) and some of the top ball-hawks from a defense that had more interceptions (17) than touchdowns (16) against. The +20 TO margin is likely not repeatable and the talent level might be lower on defense, but Hitschler is a very promising pickup.

OUTLOOK
The Dukes led the nation with 29 takeaways and tied for third in the nation with nine giveaways. That's not sustainable, but it doesn't have to be for JMU to get Over 7.5 wins. They do draw a rested Louisiana team and have a random home game against Washington State late in the year. I honestly think a repeat of last year's 8-4 is the most likely outcome, but the juice is a little cost-prohibitive.

prediction

OVER 7.5 WINS

LOUISIANA
RAGIN' CAJUNS

Head Coach: Michael Desormeaux (4th)
2024 Record: 10-4 SU & 7-6-1 ATS, 6-8 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

7 OFFENSE: 3
      DEFENSE: 4

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	RICE	-13.9	28
9/6	MCNEESE ST	-24.7	17
9/13	at Missouri	+17.4	53.5
9/20	at E Michigan	-9.4	27
9/27	MARSHALL	-9.2	32
10/11	at James Madison	+6.9	42
10/18	SOUTHERN MISS	-12	30
10/25	at Troy	-1.1	35
11/1	at S Alabama	+1.3	37
11/8	TEXAS ST UNIV	-3.8	38
11/20	at Arkansas St	-2.6	33.5
11/29	LA MONROE	-13.4	28.5

SOS
33.13
(#110 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3/0.2
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+700

MAKE PLAYOFF
15-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	30.2	37	25.2	58
YARDS PER POINT	13.6	49	14.1	79
PLAYS PER GAME	64.9	106		
TIME OF POSSESSION	31:04	38		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	39.9%	66	45.0%	109
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	410.8	40	356.7	48
YARDS PER PLAY	6.3	17	5.2	49
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.8	85		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	170.9	46	160.3	78
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.9	28	4.6	81
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.6	86		
COMPLETION %	64.5%	33	63.2%	91
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	239.9	49	196.4	33
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.4	16	6.4	21
TURNOVERS	0.8	12	1.5	45

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

38.5 CONFERENCE: #2 of 14
       NATIONAL: #79 of 136

When Billy Napier left for Florida, he left some very large shoes to fill in the Bayou. The Ragin' Cajuns won 11, 10, and 13 games in his final three seasons. Rather than disrupt the apple cart, the school decided to promote longtime assistant and former Louisiana QB Michael Desormeaux to the head coach role. After a couple of pedestrian 6-7 seasons, everything came together last year for a 10-4 campaign.

Even though a ton of talent left the program, including QBs Ben Wooldridge and Chandler Fields, Louisiana only brought in seven transfers per 247. One is LSU recruit Walker Howard at QB, but beyond that, the program is betting on their backups from last season to find a way to sustain the renewed success.

OFFENSE
The fairly undersized Howard was the sixth-ranked QB in his class and a four-star recruit who stayed at home and committed to LSU. After a season, he transferred to Ole Miss and sat behind Jaxson Dart. Now he's in Lafayette, probably hoping to shine enough for a Power Four chance in his final season of eligibility next year. Nevertheless, he is a talented, potential-filled player who will have to develop chemistry with a new set of receivers.

The Ragin' Cajuns do have their top two rushers back from last season and it was a group with 4.8 YPC, but the top returning receiver had 26 catches. LSU transfer Shelton Sampson is one of the transfers brought in by the thrifty administration, so they've clearly identified that as a position of need. The offensive line seems like one as well, but it was not prioritized in the portal.

DEFENSE
There are some returning standouts at each level of the defense, but the top five tacklers are all gone. This was also a defense that helped produce a +10 TO margin, including a +7 interception margin. Given that the Ragin' Cajuns only had 24 sacks, their cover guys really stood out for first-year DC Jim Salgado. One other area that helped the team as a whole, and especially the defense, was special teams, where Luke Paschall has put together an outstanding group.

But some of those guys were among the defenders who left. It seems highly likely that we see the defense fall back a bit. Even in 2022, when Louisiana had better defensive numbers against than last season, they went 7-6. I'm very skeptical here, as Salgado had a lot of experience on his defense last season compared to this season.

OUTLOOK
Louisiana got gifted an easy schedule last year because teams like Coastal Carolina and App State in the crossover games had major issues. They did beat Wake Forest and hang right with Tulane in the non-conference action, but the West was pretty bad last year. It's sort of a similar thing this year, so even though I think this team has regressed, the schedule looks more like 8-4 than 7-5.

prediction

OVER 7.5 WINS

LOUISIANA-MONROE
WARHAWKS

Head Coach: Bryant Vincent (2nd)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 6-6 ATS, 7-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

10 OFFENSE: 5 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 5

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/28	ST FRANCIS PA	-26.8	4.5
9/6	at Alabama	+42.2	67.5
9/20	at UTEP	+0.3	26
9/27	ARKANSAS ST	+1.5	33.5
10/4	at Northwestern	+15.1	41
10/11	at Coastal Carolina	+7.9	33.5
10/18	TROY	+3.9	35
10/25	at Southern Miss	+4.1	30
11/1	OLD DOMINION	+3.9	35
11/15	S ALABAMA	+5.4	37
11/22	at Texas St Univ	+12.7	38
11/29	at La Lafayette	+13.4	38.5

SOS
35.47
(#82 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3/-0.4
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
30-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
10000-1

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	20.2	113	30.1	94
YARDS PER POINT	15.1	86	13.1	101
PLAYS PER GAME	60.4	128		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:24	50		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	32.4%	124	43.4%	97
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	304.2	125	392.9	79
YARDS PER PLAY	5	101	5.5	65
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	37.6	44		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	169.2	49	212.9	123
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.5	53	5	103
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	21	129		
COMPLETION %	53.3%	124	56.2%	11
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	135	129	180	10
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.4	115	6.6	31
TURNOVERS	1.4	55	1.1	101

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

28.5 CONFERENCE: #14 of 14
NATIONAL: #115 of 136

The Warhawks started 5-1 last year under first-year head coach Bryant Vincent, but failed to win another game, extending their bowl game drought to 12 seasons. In fact, that 2012 Independence Bowl is their only bowl appearance since re-joining the FBS in 1994.

What Vincent accomplished over the first six games ultimately got overshadowed by the final six, as a complete lack of depth and four road games prevented his team from getting that all-important sixth win. But, I truly believe Vincent is one of the game's most underrated coaches. It's going to take several upsets to find a bowl berth, but I think they have a shot.

OFFENSE
Vincent was a solid OC at UAB under Bill Clark and had immense support from the players to be named the full-time head coach when Clark retired due to medical issues. Instead, the UAB administration went in a different direction. Vincent found himself at New Mexico as the OC and the Lobos went from 13.1 PPG and 4.0 YPP to 27.3 PPG and 6.2 YPP. Louisiana-Monroe noticed and hired him as head coach.

He serves as his own OC as well and has a QB in Aidan Armenta who is much more aware of the playbook. He'll share some time and plays with 6-foot-4 Hunter Herring, and while the stats of those two guys are not impressive, I can't help but think Vincent squeezes improvement from both of them. Unfortunately Ahmad Hardy ran for 1,351 yards and he's gone. There are a lot of new faces, but Vincent should have players better tailored to his scheme.

DEFENSE
The Warhawks also took a notable leap defensively last year, as they shaved off more than six points per game and a half-yard per play. They finished -6 in TO margin in Sun Belt play and that's what will have to improve to sniff bowl eligibility. ULM only had two interceptions in eight conference games. On offense, they threw 10 of them. DC Earnest Hill is relying on a lot of JUCO transfers to aid this unit.

Even though they didn't have a lot of picks, the pass defense was 22nd in the nation in passing yards per game against and in top 40 in completion percentage. With two 330-pound transfers on the interior of the defensive line, the run defense should get stronger after allowing 200 YPG.

OUTLOOK
There are four or five swing games on the schedule for ULM with short lines one way or the other. To me, the season hinges on how Armenta and Herring improve at QB. If Vincent works his offensive magic, this team gets at least five wins and even has a shot at a bowl game. If you couldn't tell, I'm high on him as a coach.

prediction

OVER 4.5 WINS

MARSHALL
THUNDERING HERD

Head Coach: Tony Gibson (1st)
2024 Record: 10-3 SU & 11-1-1 ATS, 6-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

4   OFFENSE: 2
DEFENSE: 2

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	at Georgia	+38.8	68.5
9/6	MISSOURI ST	-10.7	23.5
9/13	E KENTUCKY	-16.1	18.5
9/20	at Middle Tenn St	-4.7	25
9/27	at La Lafayette	+9.2	38.5
10/11	OLD DOMINION	+1	35
10/18	TEXAS ST UNIV	+3.3	38
10/30	at Coastal Carolina	+3.7	33.5
11/8	JAMES MADISON	+8	42
11/15	at Georgia St	-1.4	29
11/22	at Appalachian St	+3.3	33
11/29	GA SOUTHERN	+2.7	37.5

SOS
35.09
(#87 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.4/0.3
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
30-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
75-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	30.8	35	24.8	54
YARDS PER POINT	12	7	15.7	26
PLAYS PER GAME	65.6	98		
TIME OF POSSESSION	28:40	103		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	39.4%	69	32.3%	10
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	369.3	74	388.3	72
YARDS PER PLAY	5.6	59	5.4	59
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	39.2	29		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	197.3	20	186.2	102
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5	24	4.7	91
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	25.1	116		
COMPLETION %	57.5%	104	57.6%	22
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	172	116	202.2	38
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.9	90	7	45
TURNOVERS	0.8	8	1.5	48

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

32.0   CONFERENCE: #11 of 14
NATIONAL: #104 of 136

It is a damn shame what happened at Marshall last December. The Thundering Herd had to back out of their bowl game because the athletic department and the university did not extend head coach Charles Huff, who literally led the team to the conference title, their first in a decade. Huff left for Southern Miss and most of the roster left for various places around the country, many to Southern Miss.

Tony Gibson, a longtime assistant at West Virginia and NC State, as well as a WV native, was hired right after Huff's departure and he has a brand-new roster. It feels like you can say that about a lot of teams, but it's especially true here. One player with at least eight receptions is back. All three QBs that played in a game are gone. No RB on the roster had a rushing yard for the team. One defender with at least 17 tackles came back. It will be a long year.

OFFENSE
The portal did produce some interesting names for the Herd. Carlos Del Rio-Wilson (Syracuse) and Zion Turner (Jacksonville State) lead the charge for reps at the QB position. RB Tony Mathis was at Houston and WR Antonio Harmon was at Mississippi State. There are a lot of upperclassmen here who are simply looking for one more chance to impress or one more opportunity to play college ball.

OC Rod Smith did not follow RichRod to WVU, instead becoming the OC here. Jacksonville State really benefitted from having Tyler Huff at QB, a dual-threat guy with some mammoth numbers in the RichRod offense. I'm not sure if anybody can do that here. Furthermore, while there are a lot of juniors and seniors, very few of them had meaningful playing time at their previous stops.

DEFENSE
The story is the same on defense, where DC Shannon Morrison is back in Huntington for the fourth time. Technically one starter is back, plus a transfer who started at Middle Tennessee. The defensive numbers were terrific last season and a big catalyst as to why Marshall won the Sun Belt, going 10-3 after a 6-7 season. But, with nobody back, we'll have to wait and see how it goes.

On the plus side, Morrison was the linebackers coach from 2021-23 when Marshall allowed 23.8, 16.0, and 28.7 points per game and solid yards per play numbers. The base defense should remain similar to what Marshall had been running while he was there and for most of Huff's tenure, so the backups that stayed can grasp it quickly and maybe that helps this defense exceed expectations.

OUTLOOK
I do think that the last statement about the defense will be true, so Marshall might be a good Under bet on a week-to-week basis early on. The offense needs a ton of work, though. A lot of the "softer" opponents on the schedule are on the road and Gibson as a first-year head coach could be a really tough time.

prediction

UNDER 5.5 WINS

OLD DOMINION
MONARCHS

Head Coach: Ricky Rahne (5th)
2024 Record: 5-7 SU & 6-6 ATS, 7-5 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

11 OFFENSE: 4 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 7

SOS
36.13
(#79 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.7/0.4
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
+800

MAKE PLAYOFF
45-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	28	53	28	78
YARDS PER POINT	14.4	70	14.7	63
PLAYS PER GAME	70.8	45		
TIME OF POSSESSION	27:59	113		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	43.1%	33	43.7%	99
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	402.3	44	410.4	99
YARDS PER PLAY	5.7	56	5.6	73
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	40.1	22		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	209.8	13	172.6	94
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.2	19	4.3	62
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	27.8	95		
COMPLETION %	58.6%	97	61.1%	67
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	192.6	101	237.8	91
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.9	84	7.6	82
TURNOVERS	1.7	99	1.4	58

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

35.0 CONFERENCE: #6 of 14
NATIONAL: #93 of 136

One of the more intriguing teams in the Sun Belt this season is Old Dominion. Ricky Rahne inherited a 1-11 team for the 2020 season, but then COVID happened and his first season at the helm had to wait until 2021, as the Monarchs cancelled all of their games. In four seasons since, there have been two bowl appearances, both losses, and zero winning seasons. The talent level seems to be improved and QB Colton Joseph could be among the best in the SBC.

But, also, this is a team that has played a ton of close games that can swing the balance either way. Last year's team went 5-7 and lost by 4 to open the season against South Carolina and the seven losses were by 56 combined points, including a 20-point loss to Virginia Tech. The five wins were by 3, 7, 10, 28, and 8. So outside of the two outliers, this was a team that had a lot of games decided in the fourth quarter and that could be the case again.

OFFENSE
Joseph was a revelation for the Monarchs last season. The dual-threat sophomore had 22 total touchdowns with 11 through the air and on the ground. He was the team's second-leading rusher with 647 yards and was an integral part of the team's sack total going from 61 down to 36. This has not been a good pass-blocking OL during Rahne's tenure and it may not be again, but at least Joseph gives them a chance on broken plays.

None of the wide receivers are back and neither is leading rusher Aaron Young, as the top two returnees in the rushing department are both QBs. Year over year, now third-year OC Kevin Decker saw an improvement of 4.2 PPG and 0.5 YPP. There is reason for optimism that it all clicks this season with Joseph, who grasped the offense quickly, at the helm.

DEFENSE
The defense hasn't been good enough to stand out. And since the offense really hasn't been either, that's how you get a bunch of close games and mediocre seasons. Three of the top four tacklers are back, but the secondary is brand new and that's the major concern. Also, Rahne and DC Blake Seiler have been together for all four of the seasons that ODU has played. In that span, the team is -62 in sack differential and -8 in TO margin.

Last year's D did have 17 takeaways and 12 of them were interceptions. However, they were 102nd in third-down defense and that has to change to get the offense back on the field, and maybe with some better field position. I think Seiler might be on the hot seat and maybe that's addition by subtraction, as the Monarchs dropped off dramatically in third-down stops from 2023 to 2024.

OUTLOOK
As is often the case with schools that have pretty modest athletic budgets, Old Dominion plays two Power Four road games and they'll also host a good Liberty team. The conference schedule is no picnic, especially with some of their tougher East Division games on the road. Their crossover games are ULM and Troy, though, so those are appealing. Still, 6-6 or 5-7 seems right, even with the vig.

prediction

UNDER 6.5 WINS

SOUTH ALABAMA
JAGUARS

Head Coach: Major Applewhite (2nd)
2024 Record: 8-6 SU & 7-7 ATS, 5-9 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

8 OFFENSE: 5
       DEFENSE: 3

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	MORGAN ST	-33	7
9/6	TULANE	+6.1	45.5
9/13	at Auburn	+22.5	57
9/20	COASTAL CAROLINA	-6.8	33.5
9/27	at North Texas	+0.8	35
10/4	at Troy	+0.7	35
10/14	ARKANSAS ST	-7	33.5
10/23	at Georgia St	-6	29
11/1	LA LAFAYETTE	-1.3	38.5
11/15	at La Monroe	-5.4	28.5
11/22	SOUTHERN MISS	-10.5	30
11/29	at Texas St Univ	+3.9	38

SOS
34.00
(#101 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
3/-0.1
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+700

MAKE PLAYOFF
25-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	30	41	26.4	67
YARDS PER POINT	14.2	64	15.4	30
PLAYS PER GAME	65	104		
TIME OF POSSESSION	29:06	90		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	38.1%	82	40.0%	73
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	426.9	27	407.3	95
YARDS PER PLAY	6.6	7	6	93
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	34.7	87		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	184.9	29	152	63
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.3	15	4.4	69
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.9	81		
COMPLETION %	68.6%	14	70.9%	130
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	242	46	255.3	113
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.4	17	8.1	103
TURNOVERS	1	24	1.3	71

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
37.0 CONFERENCE: #5 of 14
          NATIONAL: #87 of 136

In my mind, a drop-off for South Alabama was inevitable last season. The Jaguars bid adieu to head coach Kane Wommack, who moved on to Alabama to be Kalen DeBoer's DC. Corey Batoon, who was South Alabama's DC, took a job with Missouri. OC Major Applewhite was promoted to head coach for another kick at the can after a mediocre stint at Houston for a couple of seasons.

Well, the Jaguars did drop in terms of defensive numbers, but improved on the offensive front and replicated their 7-6 record from the previous season. In that respect, it was a hell of a coaching job from Applewhite and DC Will Windham. Unfortunately for the Jaguars, the task at hand looks much more difficult this season thanks to some impact transfers and other personnel losses.

OFFENSE
The NIL has created a very unlevel playing field out in the open. Paying players and providing extra benefits has happened forever, but now you get bidding wars akin to free agency. The chance to make ample money in college, especially with very limited NFL prospects, is extremely attractive. So, Group of Five programs have a really hard time holding onto their quarterbacks.

Gio Lopez is an example, as he transferred to North Carolina. UNC didn't really have to fight for Lopez, per his own account of how the situation went down, but it left a big hole in the South Alabama roster after racking up over 3,000 total yards last season. Zach Pyron and some internal candidates have to replace 25 total TDs, while also missing top WR Jamaal Pritchett, who had over 1,000 yards. Leading rusher Fluff Bothwell left as well.

DEFENSE
The losses of Wommack and Batoon were clear as day. The defense allowed 4.2 more PPG and 0.8 more YPP. The offense was able to pick up the slack and a win in the Veterans Bowl over Western Michigan swung the balance of a 6-6 season into a winning one. Leading tackler Blaine Myrick is back, but that's really about it. Only one other player with more than 25 tackles has returned.

With Batoon and Wommack in 2023, the Jaguars were 28th in third-down defense and 16th in 2022. With Windham and some of the attrition on the depth chart, the Jags dropped to 67th. This is the side of the ball that worries me the most, particularly because the team was +8 in TO margin, as Lopez only threw five interceptions. With a clear downgrade at that position, the impact will be felt on defense, too.

OUTLOOK
Back-to-back seasons with big WR losses (Caullin Lacy, Pritchett), a QB transfer, declining defensive numbers, and improved teams in the Sun Belt make me think that this year will be the drop-off that I expected last year. The vig is somewhat cost-prohibitive on Under 7.5 Wins, but I really see 7-5 as a best-case scenario.

prediction
UNDER 7.5 WINS

SOUTHERN MISS
GOLDEN EAGLES

Head Coach: Charles Huff (1st)
2024 Record: 1-11 SU & 4-8 ATS, 5-7 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

11
OFFENSE: 6
DEFENSE: 5

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	MISSISSIPPI ST	+11.9	44
9/6	JACKSON ST	-9.7	22.5
9/13	APPALACHIAN ST	+0.4	33
9/20	at Louisiana Tech	+3	30
9/27	JACKSONVILLE ST	-0.8	31
10/9	at Ga Southern	+10.9	37.5
10/18	at La Lafayette	+12	38.5
10/25	LA MONROE	-4.1	28.5
11/8	at Arkansas St	+6.6	33.5
11/15	TEXAS ST UNIV	+5.5	38
11/22	at S Alabama	+10.5	37
11/29	TROY	+3.2	35

SOS
34.12
(#100 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.2/-0.5
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
14-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
200-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

odds

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	13.5	132	40.3	130
YARDS PER POINT	20.6	132	11.5	129
PLAYS PER GAME	65	104		
TIME OF POSSESSION	27:32	118		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	23.5%	133	43.2%	96
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	277	129	465.1	125
YARDS PER PLAY	4.3	129	6.9	132
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	35.2	79		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	107.8	116	244.5	133
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	3.1	128	6.1	134
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	25.8	114		
COMPLETION %	51.8%	129	66.8%	121
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	169.2	119	220.5	61
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	6.6	108	8.7	124
TURNOVERS	2.5	134	0.7	128

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

30.0 CONFERENCE: #12 of 14
NATIONAL: #108 of 136

Marshall's stupidity is Southern Mississippi's gain, as the Golden Eagles were able to hire Charles Huff after the Thundering Herd opted not to give him a new contract. That's not to say that Huff will come in and be a magic man for a team that went 1-11 last season and has one winning season since 2019. But, it at least represents some hope and optimism in Hattiesburg, as Huff comes in off of winning the Sun Belt title.

Reps and roster spots are going to be open on a 1-11 team and a lot of Marshall players followed Huff south, so this could be a hastened rebuild to say the least. Most of last year's roster left anyway, but you won't miss many players from a team that finished 10 games under .500 and was outscored 38-15 on average as a new head coach.

OFFENSE
Not only are a lot of Marshall players on the two-deep, but there are a few SEC transfers as well, including RB Jeffrey Pittman (Mississippi State), WR Micah Davis (Mississippi), and OL Aaryn Parks (South Carolina). It takes very little to raise the bar for a program that was -19 in TO margin and mustered just 4.7 yards per play with 45 sacks against, but Huff and OC Blake Anderson have the chance to raise the bar several notches.

Anderson spent several seasons as an OC before getting his first head coaching job at Arkansas State. He left Utah State under some questionable circumstances, but Huff hired him to run the offense anyway. Braylon Braxton has child-sized shoes to fill at QB after the Golden Eagles combined for a 7/17 TD/INT ratio with a trio of QBs. The top WR had 421 yards. Whatever happens here, it will be better than last year.

DEFENSE
Defensively, Marshall transfers dot the two-deep as well and that is not a surprise with new DC Jason Semore, who was with Huff in Huntington. Broadarius Lewis led the Golden Eagles with four of the team's 20 sacks and he opted to stick around, along with top returning tackler (46) Chris Jones.

Huff was at Marshall from 2021-24 with a defense that allowed 23.8, 16.0, 28.7, and 23.1 PPG and 5.1, 4.6, 5.5, and 5.4 YPP. Semore was his DC for the final two seasons. Marshall also had at least 35 sacks in each of Huff's four seasons. Southern Miss had 44 back in 2022 and no more than 25 any other season. Like the offense, this should be a good turnaround.

OUTLOOK
Everybody knows Southern Miss will be significantly better. How much better is the question? Their win total of 4.5 is very heavily juiced to the Over, a sign that maybe we'll see a 5.5 with juice swinging the other way at some point. The schedule is very manageable with one Power Four opponent (at home, no less) and two C-USA teams in other non-conference action.

prediction

OVER 4.5 WINS

TEXAS STATE
BOBCATS

Head Coach: G. J. Kinne (3rd)
2024 Record: 8-5 SU & 6-7 ATS, 6-5-2 O-U-T

RETURNING STARTERS

5 OFFENSE: 3
DEFENSE: 2

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	E MICHIGAN	-13.6	27
9/6	at Tx-San Antonio	+6.7	41.5
9/13	at Arizona St	+20.6	56
9/20	NICHOLLS ST	-26.1	15
10/4	at Arkansas St	-1.6	33.5
10/11	TROY	-5.4	35
10/18	at Marshall	-3.3	32
10/28	JAMES MADISON	+1.6	42
11/8	at La Lafayette	+3.8	38.5
11/15	at Southern Miss	-5.5	30
11/22	LA MONROE	-12.7	28.5
11/29	S ALABAMA	-3.9	37

SOS
34.72
(#94 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.8/-0.3
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
+700

MAKE PLAYOFF
19-1

CFP CHAMPION
1000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	36.8	3	24.3	48
YARDS PER POINT	13	28	15	46
PLAYS PER GAME	74.1	15		
TIME OF POSSESSION	27:58	114		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	44.6%	24	38.4%	56
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	477	5	365.9	56
YARDS PER PLAY	6.4	9	5.2	48
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	40.3	20		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	209.1	14	153.2	64
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	5.2	22	4.1	55
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	32.3	49		
COMPLETION %	69.6%	12	58.3%	31
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	267.9	17	212.8	50
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	8.3	20	7	46
TURNOVERS	1.8	108	1.5	48

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS
38.0 CONFERENCE: #3 of 14
NATIONAL: #81 of 136

Texas State will join the second coming of the Pac-12 next season, as the Bobcats have been a Sun Belt member since 2013. They were a member of the WAC when they transitioned to FBS in 2012. In that time, the Bobcats have two bowl appearances. Both under G.J. Kinne. Both in the last two seasons. Both wins in the First Responder Bowl.

But, that was not the goal for Texas State last season. They wanted more. And, frankly, they should have had more. They were favored in all 13 games, lost five of them, and only went 6-7 ATS. They nearly lost to a guy playing QB for the first time since 9th grade in their bowl game as a two-touchdown favorite. Back-to-back 8-5 seasons are good, especially for a program that had one winning season (2014) prior, but it's time to raise the ceiling.

OFFENSE
Texas State had a pretty highly-touted transfer in Jordan McCloud at QB last season, as he came over from a big year at James Madison. This season, the Bobcats have SMU transfer Keldric Luster and Auburn transfer Holden Geriner to go with a handful of other options. Luster, Geriner, and the others are nowhere near as accomplished or experienced as McCloud, who had 30 TD passes last season, but also 13 interceptions.

This is a transfer-heavy team on both sides of the ball. The offense is replacing three receivers with at least 630 yards each, a 1,000-yard running back, and most of the linemen. Kinne is a rapid riser in the coaching ranks and an innovative offensive mind, but this is an on-the-fly rebuild to say the least.

DEFENSE
The defense is also a work in progress with three guys back that had at least 30 tackles. The one benefit is that Texas State worked in a lot of guys last season, so the backups that have been elevated up the depth chart are not completely green. Kalil Alexander had 6.5 of the team's 36 sacks last season and is a big piece, literally and figuratively, to bring back.

There are a lot of transfers from bigger programs on the roster as well, so this side of the ball projects much like the offense. Though it is worth noting that DC Dexter McCoil improved the defense by 8.3 PPG and 0.4 YPP in his first season compared to what happened in 2023. That was even with a -5 TO margin, as the Bobcats offense gave it away 23 times.

OUTLOOK
I think the market is down a bit on Texas State because they did absolutely fall short of expectations last season as a favorite in every game with five outright losses in that role. Road games at UTSA and Arizona State are also very tough. But, I do think they are 2-2 at worst in non-conference and 6-2 in Sun Belt play is not a stretch, especially at plus money on Over 7.5.

prediction

OVER 7.5 WINS

TROY
TROJANS

Head Coach: Gerad Parker (2nd)
2024 Record: 4-8 SU & 6-6 ATS, 6-6 O-U

RETURNING STARTERS

10 OFFENSE: 5 INCLUDING QB
DEFENSE: 5

SOS
35.21
(#86 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/0.4
HOME/ROAD

odds

CONFERENCE
16-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
100-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE STAT	RANK	DEFENSE STAT	RANK
POINTS PER GAME	25.3	76	29.9	91
YARDS PER POINT	14.1	62	12.3	116
PLAYS PER GAME	67	82		
TIME OF POSSESSION	30:35	47		
3RD DOWN CONV. %	50.0%	2	39.7%	71
TOTAL YARDS PER GAME	356.7	87	369.1	57
YARDS PER PLAY	5.3	80	5.9	88
RUSH ATTEMPTS PER GAME	36.5	62		
RUSH YARDS PER GAME	151.2	76	153.5	65
YARDS PER RUSH ATTEMPT	4.1	75	4.5	75
PASS ATTEMPTS PER GAME	28.6	85		
COMPLETION %	61.9%	61	66.8%	120
PASSING YARDS PER GAME	205.5	92	215.5	55
YARDS PER PASS ATTEMPT	7.2	73	8	99
TURNOVERS	1.5	67	0.8	121

preview

STEVE MAKINEN POWER RATINGS

35.0 CONFERENCE: #7 of 14
NATIONAL: #95 of 136

Troy head coach Gerad Parker should be on high alert this season. Larry Blakeney was Troy's head coach from 1991-2014. Neal Brown took over in 2015 and opened 4-8, but then rattled off three straight double-digit winning seasons. Then Chip Lindsey took over and he was fired before the end of his third season after a trio of five-win campaigns. Then Jon Sumrall took over and went 23-4 over two seasons before taking over at Tulane.

This is a program with very high standards, given that they've had five seasons with at least 10 wins over the last decade. The athletic department didn't have much sympathy or patience for Lindsey's 15-20 record and Parker's very underwhelming 4-8 debut fell well short of those standards. The Trojans did win three of four to end last season, so maybe the arrow is pointing up.

OFFENSE
Maybe there is some sympathy from the decision-makers for how Parker's tenure began. The Trojans had to use three different QBs because two of them suffered season-ending injuries. Those two guys are back, as Goose Crowder and Tucker Kilcrease will battle for reps. Crowder was the more impressive of the two statistically, but one of his starts was against Florida A&M.

One year removed from losing all-time leading rusher Kimani Vidal, the Trojans bid adieu to another 1,000-yard runner in Damien Taylor. They'll likely find a back, but the efficiency numbers across the map for Troy are likely to drop, especially with a 1,000-yard receiver who hauled in 11 of the team's 21 receiving touchdowns gone.

DEFENSE
While the offense was in a state of flux most of the season, the more problematic side of the ball was this one. The Sumrall defenses allowed 17.1 PPG in each season and 4.7 and 4.8 yards per play, respectively. DC Dontae Wright's unit allowed 28.4 PPG and 6.0 YPP. It was the first time since 2019 - the first Lindsey season - that Troy allowed at least 6.0 YPP. Brendan Jackson, who had twice as many tackles for loss as anybody else, is a noteworthy loss.

Otherwise, the coaching staff hit the portal really hard to find improved talent. Not many of them came from power programs and this defense looks to be a little bit undersized at the point of attack. Maybe that will help increase the sack total of just 19 from last season, as Sumrall's two defenses had 88 sacks over two years. It could also hurt the yards per carry numbers if they're looking at more speed than strength.

OUTLOOK
I'm down on Troy again this season. I was down on the hire of Parker and I don't see things going all that much better in Year 2. The only non-conference game Troy will be favored in is against a FCS opponent. They get a decent Old Dominion team along with a Georgia State team that may be much improved in crossover play.

prediction

UNDER 5.5 WINS