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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.

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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.

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

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

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
---	STAT	RANK	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

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

W

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

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	COLORADO ST	-18.8	35.5
9/6	CAL DAVIS	-19	35
9/20	at Washington St	-13.4	35
9/27	OHIO ST	+14.8	69
10/4	at Maryland	-6.7	42
10/10	RUTGERS	-6.5	48
10/18	at Michigan	+11.7	60
10/25	ILLINOIS	+0.9	54.5
11/8	at Wisconsin	+0.6	49.5
11/15	PURDUE	-19.1	35
11/22	at UCLA	-2.3	46.5
11/29	OREGON	+10.2	64

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 STAT	RANK	DEFENSE 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

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

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

schedule

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

odds

CONFERENCE
NA

MAKE PLAYOFF
100-1

CFP CHAMPION
2000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		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.

prediction

UNDER 5.5 WINS

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