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OH10 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.

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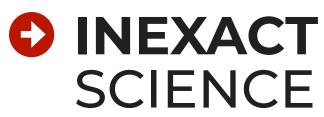**EARN 1%** CASHBACK REWARDS ON GAMING AND SPORTS APP LOADS[1]

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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.

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

DATE	OPPONENT	LINE*	OPPONENT PR
8/30	LIU POST	-55.4	7
9/6	SOUTH FLORIDA	-21.3	41
9/13	at LSU	+6.6	62.5
9/20	at Miami Fl	+3	60
10/4	TEXAS	+7.2	69.5
10/11	at Texas A&M	+3.9	60
10/18	MISSISSIPPI ST	-18	44
11/1	vs. Georgia	+6.5	68.5
11/8	at Kentucky	-8.5	48
11/15	at Ole Miss	+6.9	63
11/22	TENNESSEE	-2.8	59.5
11/29	FLORIDA ST	-12	50

SOS
52.51
(#1 toughest of 136)

FIELD RATINGS
2.6/-0.5
HOME/ROAD

CONFERENCE
18-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
+400

CFP CHAMPION
40-1

	OFFENSE STAT	OFFENSE RANK	DEFENSE STAT	DEFENSE 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

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

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

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

CONFERENCE
+380

MAKE PLAYOFF
+170

CFP CHAMPION
40-1

	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

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?

prediction

UNDER 9.5 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

odds

CONFERENCE
150-1

MAKE PLAYOFF
300-1

CFP CHAMPION
5000-1

2024 stats

	OFFENSE		DEFENSE	
	STAT	RANK	STAT	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

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