College Football Viewer's Guide: Week 2
A statistical overview of the week in college football

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Mack Brown's victory and genuine emotion may have been the feel-good story of Week 1, but the long-term 2019 prognosis of several teams after a slew of injuries to starting QBs was the most important. USC's JT Daniels, South Carolina's Jake Bentley, Stanford's KJ Costello, and Northwestern's TJ Green all will miss time; Daniels and Green are both confirmed out for the year. The story of the season for these teams, unfortunately, is now intrinsically tied to the fall of their leading men under the last rays of summer.

In last week's lone ranked matchup, Oregon flew off to a fast start but couldn't put Auburn away. Freshman QB Bo Nix delivered when it counted, ensuring that a couple key plays on the final drive will be the moments remembered, but he struggled much of the game and will need to play better overall for Auburn to rise above middle-of-the-pack in the SEC West.

Preseason playoff favorites Clemson (from the jump) and Alabama (after a sputtering start) did not relinquish their spots as the teams to beat, but Oklahoma made a strong case that they're not too far behind in the chase: Jalen Hurts gave a bravura performance in his first outing as a Sooner; and, perhaps more importantly, the defense showed life in hemming in Houston's offense much of the night in a game that wasn't as close as the final score indicated. If OU and their top-ranked offense can get moderate support from the defense this season, it's hard to foresee anyone from the Big XII obstructing their path, considering the RB precariousness at Texas, the 3OT grind for Iowa State vs Northern Iowa, the continued lackluster offense of TCU, and the Oklahoma State defensive holes exposed by Oregon State's improving offense.

Star Ratings: All starred games are either expected to be highly competitive or have a reasonable probability of an upset. Beyond that, the criteria below are used, which combine some subjectivity with objective statistical analysis.

★ Interesting game because of matchup quality, team styles, conference races, and/or setting

★★ Important game with major conference or rankings implications

★★★ Critical game with New Year's Six implications

In the game title, AP Rankings are used until CFP Rankings become available. All times are Eastern and imply PM (or 12:00 noon) unless otherwise specified.

Week 2 begins with a tricky Friday night homecoming for a Week 1 road warrior, calls for a reunion at the 'Shoe, ushers in the second and third ★★★ games of the young season, and (with all due respect to Georgia State) offers UNC the chance to become college football's enduring Cinderella story.

Friday, September 6

To begin, let my apologies be hereby pronounced to Rice, labeled in this space last week as "one of the worst teams in the FBS" who Army "would methodically grind out" in a mismatch. Certainly I expected it, despite not being as high on Army as many (#49 in my preseason rankings). But the Rice Owl defense defied the numbers and captured attention, stymieing the usually well-oiled Black Knight offense in the

way that works: disciplined support from all three levels. Based on 0-100 percentile metrics, the DL turned in a 65, the LBs a 79, and the DBs a 64. None were extraordinary, but all were solid to good, executing assignment defense that made Army work much harder than anyone expected for points. In the end, Rice came up short in a valiant effort (14-7 Army victory) that should at least serve as motivation in more winnable conference games.

That may not start this week, however, as **Rice hosts Wake Forest (CBSSN 8:00)** in what at best hope could be a proverbial trap or letdown game for the Demon Deacons, who emerged victorious in a wire-to-wire battle with MWC contender Utah State last Saturday and look ahead to their first ACC game in Week 3 (vs emerging threat North Carolina). With his ground game snuffed out by the visiting Aggies, Wake QB Jamie Newman dazzled through the air, turning in a 90th percentile performance against a Utah State secondary that features several quality players. The Deacons struggled in pass defense, giving up about 11 net points through the air, but homefield Rice does not have the passing game explosiveness to take advantage the way Jordan Love of Utah State did.

Prediction
Wake Forest 34
Rice 14

An hour later, **Marshall visits #24 Boise State (ESPN2 9:00)** in the home opener for the perennial G5 contender. Boise takes the blue turf 1-0, but you wouldn't have guessed it in the early going in Tallahassee last Saturday. Florida State, in a must-win game in their bid for relevance, had the Broncos on their heels in the first half--particularly the first quarter--as excellent coordinator Kendal Briles took the offensive reins and seemed to finally have unlocked the promise of FSU's top-tier talent. But the winning culture of Boise State asserted itself assiduously, scratching away at the Seminole lead point by point, until finally they wrested away the lead and the game from the home side. Freshman QB Hank Bachmeier seemed more like a veteran, notching a 68th percentile performance that was all the more impressive for being on the road at a traditional power in his first collegiate game.

Marshall dispatched VMI as expected; they enter Boise as yet unchallenged but clearly among the frontrunners for the C-USA Championship. In 2018, it was the defense that carried the team (#64 in SOS-adjusted scoring defense; #99 in scoring offense), and though they contend with turnover at all three levels of defense, expect more of the same this season. The secondary has quality depth and experience that could cause Bachmeier some problems. At LB, versatile Jaquan Yulee starred in Week 1, thriving in an elevated role, accounting for about 17% of Marshall's total defensive impact and making his mark in both the run and pass games.

Don't count out the Herd in this one.

Prediction
Marshall 23
#24 Boise State 35

Saturday, September 7

An early kickoff affords an extended first look at the preseason MAC favorite Ohio Bobcats (**Ohio at Pittsburgh, ACCN 11:00 am**). Frank Solich's bunch entered the season at a nearly even money shot of

winning the conference (47%), those odds largely powered by star SR QB Nathan Rourke, who received an A+ grade (95th percentile) in 2018 and is off and rolling again in 2019 (91st percentile in 41-20 win over Rhode Island in Week 1). Sharing the backfield, SO Julian Ross is the featured RB, but keep an eye on De'Montre Tuggle, who uncorked a pair of TD runs on just a few carries.

Against a reeling Pitt team, who has now lost a second starting defensive lineman for the season (after star Rashad Weaver was lost in camp) and is already 0-1 in conference play, the Bobcats have a real chance of notching a P5 road win. And if they do, the chances of an undefeated regular season quadruple from 9% preseason to 36% after a 2-0 start.

Pitt needs to recover quickly from the staggering blow Virginia dealt it a week ago, lest the season spins out of control before it ever gets started. While the thinning defensive front will have its hands full with dual-threat Rourke and Ohio's commitment to running the football, it's the offensive passing game that desperately needs improvement after hemorrhaging 18 net points to the Cavaliers' pass defense in their 14-30 defeat.

Prediction
Ohio 33
Pittsburgh 42

Two ranked teams face stiff competition in noon kickoffs: ★★ **Cincinnati at #5 Ohio State (ABC 12:00)** and ★ **#21 Syracuse at Maryland (ESPN 12:00)**.

Justin Fields stole the show in his first half as the Buckeye quarterback, wasting no time to lead his new-look offense to four early scores en route to a 45-21 over Lane Kiffin's FAU.

The competition ratchets up considerably for the transfer QB this week, as former Ohio State DC and onetime interim HC Luke Fickell brings one of the nation's top defenses to the Horseshoe--although the season-ending injury to S James Wiggins, the Bearcats' best player, is a disappointing blow to the unit. Even without Wiggins, UCLA's offense appeared hapless against Cincinnati, mustering only 14 points in a second consecutive season-opening loss to the Bearcats. Ryan Day's offense is far ahead of Chip Kelly's, and the Bucks will not be held at home to only a pair of TDs, but LBs Perry Young and Brian Wright and a sharp secondary won't yield scoring drives easily. Offensively, Cincinnati will need to get more from its ground game, which was a serious liability against UCLA (-10 net points). That figure needs to tip into the positive to keep the upset hopes alive.

Prediction
Cincinnati 21
#5 Ohio State 29

Meanwhile, a ranked Syracuse team hits the road in a game that is a true toss-up. Though Howard isn't top-notch competition, Maryland's 79-0 thrashing of the FCS squad opened eyes across the country. An afterthought in the Big Ten East, competing to stay out of the cellar and reach a bowl game, the Terrapins and new HC Mike Locksley served notice that the rebuild--helmed by VT transfer QB Josh Jackson--could be ahead of schedule. Overreaction should be cautioned here, of course. One dominant game against an overmatched FCS school is no crowning achievement, but the perception has changed, and certainly the Orange are on alert in this road test that looks harder than it did in the preseason.

In a bit of a surprise, it was the Syracuse defense that did all the work in their 24-0 road win over Liberty, accounting for +32 net points in the game--8 points higher than the margin of victory. The offense accounted for virtually nothing (+0.5 points), and the penalties were a disaster (-8.6 points). If HC Dino Babers hasn't cleaned that up this week, they'll be smacked out of the rankings in College Park.

Prediction
#21 Syracuse 25
Maryland 24

In the afternoon slot, ★ **Colorado vs #25 Nebraska (FOX 3:30)** is a historical Big 8 rivalry and a rematch from a year ago, when the Buffaloes toppled Nebraska in Lincoln, 33-28. The Cornhuskers were ranked in the preseason largely due to high expectations for the offense, which sputtered (-13 net points) against a bottom-tier Sun Belt defense in its lackluster 35-21 home win over South Alabama in Week 1. Heisman-hyped sophomore Adrian Martinez turned in a forgettable 19th percentile QB performance that must get significantly better. The Nebraska offensive brain trust of HC Scott Frost, OC Troy Walters, and QB coach Mario Verduzco are too good to let this become the norm, and they cannot count on the pass defense to turn in another remarkable +23 net point outing--especially on the road against the experience and talented passing attack of Colorado, featuring proven SR QB Steven Montez and awards candidate WR Laviska Shenault.

Colorado State exposed some defensive deficiencies of Colorado's, so Martinez and the Huskers have an opportunity to erase the memories of a dismal opener and post a solid road win over an old conference foe in a coin-flip matchup.

Prediction
#25 Nebraska 30
Colorado 29

The headliner of the afternoon, ★★★ **#12 Texas A&M at #1 Clemson (ABC 3:30)**, represents the only speed bump in Clemson's express lane to a 12-0 season, as the Aggies held a relatively large 17% win probability (1 in 6 chance) in the preseason that didn't budge much after Week 1. No other team on Clemson's schedule has better than a single-digit win probability, especially given South Carolina's Week 1 woes (losing to UNC and losing starter Jake Bentley potentially for the season).

Tiger phenom Travis Etienne continues to look like the best RB in the nation, the WRs are elite, and if there was any underperformance in their disembowelment of Georgia Tech, it was from top Heisman candidate Trevor Lawrence (43rd percentile). If you assume Lawrence will be sharper as the season goes on--which is likely--then the roaring Tiger offense we saw last week should get even better. But if you're looking for the upset angle, then the narrow path threads its way through another inefficient outing by Lawrence, with A&M's secondary--which dominated overmatched Texas State last Thursday night--contesting balls against one of the nation's top receiver groups and coming away an interception or two.

Offensively, QB Kellen Mond and the strong A&M ground game may be able to challenge the new Clemson front, shortening the game (good for the underdog) if they can grind out first downs and keep Lawrence, Etienne, and the explosive WRs on the sideline.

While I think the Aggies OL can open enough running lanes to keep A&M alive into the second half, Clemson is too overwhelming to take down on the road and will continue their relentless drive to perfection and the playoff.

Prediction
#12 Texas A&M 24
#1 Clemson 40

Can it get any worse for Tennessee after their humiliating loss to Georgia State? While waiting for Saturday's other mammoth contest to kick off, catch the beginning of **BYU at Tennessee (ESPN 7:00)** to see if the Volunteers are in for a full 2019 death spiral or, though it's hard to imagine after last week, bounce back with a quality home win against a decent Cougar squad.

Maybe against better judgment, I'm leaning toward the latter, giving the Vols a desperately needed shot of confidence and scuttling BYU's season in the process.

Prediction
BYU 22
Tennessee 32

Don't miss the kickoff of ★ ★ ★ **#6 LSU at #9 Texas (ABC 7:30)**, the first top-10 matchup of the young season and a major nonconference achievement in the resume of the victor come November and December.

LSU opened up the offense and Joe Burrow struck time and again, hitting a 96th percentile performance in the Tigers' whipping of not-as-bad-as-they-looked Georgia Southern, doing his damage exclusively through the air. The line protected well, WR Justin Jefferson made the most of his opportunities in a spread-the-ball-around system, and the defense allowed Georgia Southern no breathing room, equally snuffing out the run and the pass.

Texas hobbles into the game with only one scholarship RB remaining, Keaontay Ingram, who played well in Week 1 but can't shoulder the entire load himself. HC Tom Herman and OC Tim Beck got creative, involving players like Roschon Johnson and Devin Duvernay in the run game to support Ingram and QB Sam Ehlinger.

An X-factor here is special teams: Texas notched +4.6 net points in the third phase last week, while LSU got tripped up for -3.3 points. In a close game, special teams and penalties often loom large, but I like the Tigers--finally looking dangerous on offense--to outlast the Longhorns in what should be a classic.

Prediction
#6 LSU 33
#9 Texas 27

As commercial breaks allow, monitor ★ **Miami at North Carolina (ACCN 8:00)** to see if Mack Brown can keep the dream of the young season alive after his victorious return as the general of the Tar Heels. Now that UNC looks like a tough out, this is a legitimately important game in the well-balanced ACC Coastal, a division that almost any team can win. Emotion will favor North Carolina in their first home game of the

second Mack era, and both freshman QBs will likely struggle at stretches, but in the end I trust Miami's front-to-back defensive quality more and will stick with the Hurricanes over the upstart Tar Heels.

This one figures to be a tight contest, though, so a single turnover or special teams breakdown could swing the game the other way. If Miami drops to 0-2, their record expectation slips to 6-6, so missing a bowl game becomes a real possibility.

Prediction
Miami FL 24
North Carolina 20

Finish off Week 2 with a trio of West Coast games, including two Pac-12 conference tilts.

California at #14 Washington (FS1 10:30) promises to be a defensive slugfest, potentially the lowest scoring game of the entire weekend. Cal started slow last week, going down in the first half to UC Davis, before eventually emerging as a 14-point winner. Washington had no such trouble against perennial FCS power Eastern Washington, a bullish sign for the Pac-12 North favorite Huskies. Points will be a premium, but it's hard to see Cal mustering enough offense in Husky Stadium to seriously challenge Washington.

QB questions loom large as ★ **#23 Stanford travels to USC (ESPN 10:30)**. KJ Costello is questionable for Stanford; Kedon Slovis is untested as JT Daniels's replacement for USC. If Costello, an all-conference caliber quarterback, can play, that's a huge plus for Stanford. Assuming it's a battle of backup signal-callers, the inability of Stanford to resume its old identity as a run-first power is a major concern on the road.

If either of the Pac-12 games disappoints, keep the remote ready for a fourth-quarter switch to **Minnesota at Fresno State (CBSSN 10:30)**. The Golden Gophers barely survived at home against South Dakota State last Thursday night; now they play a Fresno team that gave USC all they could handle in Week 1.

Predictions
California 9
#14 Washington 22

#23 Stanford 21
USC 28

Minnesota 27
Fresno State 19