College Football Viewer's Guide: Week 3
A statistical overview of the week in college football

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September continues to take no mercy on starting quarterbacks. The SEC East has been struck twice: South Carolina's Jake Bentley underwent surgery that will sideline him the rest of the year, and now he is joined by Kentucky starter Terry Wilson, who suffered a season-ending knee injury on Saturday in the Wildcat win over Eastern Michigan. (In a rare piece of good news on this front, Rice QB Wiley Green-- after suffering a scary neck injury trying to plunge into the goal line versus Wake Forest--was released from the hospital after his tests came back negative.)

On a positive note for USC, freshman Kedon Slovis may have solved their QB woes, as he passed exceptionally well for a young player in his first start, leading the Trojans to a convincing conference win over Stanford--whose defense had made life miserable for Northwestern's signal-callers in Week 1.

Further up the coast, a Cal team I did not expect to muster any offense sparked the most consequential upset of the early 2019 season, prematurely ending Washington's Purple Reign in a game almost no one saw (ending at 4:22 am Eastern time due to severe weather delays at Husky Stadium). If there were any doubts that Utah is the clear Pac-12 playoff favorite, those should now be erased.

Speaking of playoff favorites, Clemson is the closest thing to a lock this early in the season in the history of the CFP. While A&M played admirably in the first quarter and held an early lead--and never gave up, fighting hard to the end to score a last-minute touchdown that may have frustrated some bettors--Clemson seized control and never seemed in much danger. No teams left on Clemson's schedule have better than a 5% chance of tripping up the Tigers. Besides key injuries, probably the only team that has the potential to upend Clemson would be Bronco Mendenhall's Cavaliers--presuming they keep winning and playing well--in the ACC Championship Game.

As for LSU-Texas...just to set up a theatrical finish, I wish the Longhorns had managed to secure the football on that onside kick. Texas now has zero room for error in its quest for the CFP; LSU, meanwhile, keeps itself very much alive in a division that is almost certain to produce a team in the bracket. Ed Orgeron's squad is now on cruise control, virtually unchallenged, until an Oct. 12th trip to The Swamp.

Week 3 begins with a nonconference game between conference rivals, gets a first look at the red-hot Maryland Terrapins, and heads into the heartland for a classic in-stater with more on the line than ever.

> 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.
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> ★ Interesting game because of matchup quality, team styles, conference races, and/or setting
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> ★★ Important game with major conference or rankings implications
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> ★★★ Critical game with New Year's Six implications
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> 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.

Friday, September 13

Separated by division and not guaranteed an annual crossover to maintain their rivalry, **North Carolina and Wake Forest (ESPN 6:00)** devised a novel solution: schedule each other in a "nonconference" game. Last week, I declared that Mack Brown's Tar Heels--contingent on a win over Miami--would be America's Cinderella team. UNC took care of their end of the bargain and sit atop the Coastal Division as co-leaders with Virginia, while the staggered Hurricanes are now on bowl game watch as their record expectation has slipped to 6-6 after an 0-2 start. UNC QB Sam Howell continues to impress in the passing game, and he has good supporting skill pieces in RB Javonte Williams (68th offensive percentile, based on overall efficiency) and WRs Dyami Brown (65), Dazz Newsome (74), and Rontavius Groves (79).

Wake Forest is off to a solid 2-0 start after beating a good Utah State team in a 60-minute effort and taking care of plucky Rice team that hasn't rolled over for stiff competition in 2019. The Deacon passing attack has thrived (+21.5 net points / game, or NPG), although the slow-developing rush offense is a bit of a weakness (-3.5 NPG). This matchup, though not worth anything in the conference, should provide an entertaining aerial display between Howell and excellent Wake QB Jamie Newman.

Prediction
North Carolina 33
Wake Forest 31

In the late kickoff, ★ **#20 Washington State plays Houston (ESPN 9:15)** in a neutral-site game in...Houston. Mike Leach's Cougars are one of only two undefeated Pac-12 North teams after the first two weeks of the season. That makes them a playoff dark horse: though not favored to make a deep run at the final four, a team with a prolific offense and, in recent seasons, a surprisingly strong defense cannot be shrugged off entirely. The game to circle is September 28th when a likely 4-0 Washington State travels to Utah. The Utes will be coming off a tough matchup with USC and could be vulnerable to an upset.

Keep an eye on surging freshman LB Hank Pladson, an early-season surprise in coordinator Tracy Claeys's defense, as well as stout run-stopping defensive linemen Dallas Hobbs and Nnamdi Oguayo, who have combined for 18% of Wazzou's total run defense thus far, a high number for a pair of DL. They will need to hem in sensational running QB D'Eriq King of Houston, who continues to do his serious damage on the ground. If King can be contained--a big IF--and forced to the air, Washington State should advance without too much difficulty, especially since Houston hasn't shown the ability in coverage to stop a potent passing attack.

Prediction
#20 Washington State 46
Houston 33

Saturday, September 14

The Maryland Terrapins are one of the stories of the first two weeks, racing off to an unfathomable 71 points per game: putting away Howard by a big margin in the opener was not unexpected, but the annihilation of a ranked Syracuse team certainly was. If the lopsided 79-0 scoreline vs Howard raised eyebrows, the 63-20 evisceration of the Orange dropped jaws. Hitting the road for the first time, **#21**

Maryland at Temple (CBSSN 12:00) may not seem like a danger zone for the nation's top-scoring team, but 1-0 Temple--rested after a Week 2 bye--has a defensive coaching staff with pedigree from their time at Northern Illinois with an extra week to prepare.

While I think the Owls, playing in Philadelphia, won't get run off the field like Howard and Syracuse, I do think Maryland QB Josh Jackson (formerly of Virginia Tech) and the Terp offense are firing on too many cylinders for a transitional Temple team to hang around for four quarters.

Prediction
#21 Maryland 42
Temple 28

The top game of the noon slot, ★ **#6 Ohio State at Indiana (FOX 12:00)**, is the first hurdle in the Buckeye race to the Big Ten East championship. Ohio State's dismantling of a pretty good Cincinnati team made an impression, and though the competition is tough and deep in the East, the Bucks have earned the nod as the early-season favorite over Michigan (whose ball-handling woes continued in an OT win against Army), Michigan State (terrific defense but still uneven on offense), and Penn State (good but untested so far).

Then there's Indiana, not perceived to be a real threat for the divisional crown (2.4% chance in the preseason) but usually a tough out and an opponent never to be taken lightly. The surprise of Hoosier camp was the choice of freshman Michael Penix Jr. as QB1 over last year's starter, Peyton Ramsey. Against subpar competition, Penix Jr. has been solid, and Indiana has performed about as expected: Indiana was predicted to win its first two games by an average score of 48-20; their actual average score in their two wins was 43-12. What the Hoosiers lacked in 2018 was star power--they had a bevy of B and C grade players, but only K Logan Justus earned an A grade in overall efficiency, which he has continued so far in 2019. An ace kicker in the back pocket is crucial for an underdog, but offensive and defensive playmakers need to emerge for Justus's placekicking to make a dent against Ohio State. A couple to watch for a breakthrough: SO TE Peyton Hendershot and SO DB Jaylin Williams.

UPDATE: Ohio State QB Michael Penix Jr. is now listed as a game-time decision due to an unspecified injury.

If you're looking for a third game to work into your rotation--particularly if Maryland and/or Ohio State take off and leave the underdogs in the dust--flip over to **Kansas State at Mississippi State (ESPN 12:00)**, a cross-sectional between two under-the-radar 2-0 teams. KSU QB Skylar Thompson (99th percentile in offensive efficiency) has been just about perfect so far; MSU QB Tommy Stevens (transfer from Penn State) is listed as questionable for the game. In what should be a tight defensive game, the potential absence of Stevens looms large and opens the door for the visitors to spring an upset.

Predictions
#6 Ohio State 36
Indiana 24

Kansas State 17
Mississippi State 25

The bad news for Stanford, coming off last week's tough conference loss, is that OT Walker Little--their only returning full-time starter from 2018--has been ruled out for the year, but the good news is the return of QB K.J. Costello to the starting lineup. Costello was among the league's best in 2018, earning an A- grade as the manager of the Cardinal offense. His return will undoubtedly provide a boost after backup Davis Mills struggled mightily as his replacement (3rd percentile), as ★ **Stanford at #17 UCF (ESPN 3:30)** has the potential to be a much more competitive battle than last week's disaster against USC. Given the discrepancies in QB efficiency, it's clear that Costello is irreplaceable this season.

In their own QB news, UCF's Darriel Mack Jr. is now available, which creates an interesting dynamic with Notre Dame transfer Brandon Wimbush, who began the season as the starter, and freshman Dillon Gabriel, who started against FAU and has been more efficient than Wimbush (85th vs 52nd percentile) thus far as they've split time due to UCF's blowout wins and Wimbush's minor injury. Whether official or not, there is an ongoing QB competition for HC Josh Heupel and QB coach Jeff Lebby to resolve that is great from a depth perspective but could prove distracting.

DB Aaron Robinson has done it all for the Knight defense, registering a lofty 17% impact rating, meaning he has accounted for about one-sixth of UCF's defensive net points--a very good thing considering UCF's defense is averaging +22.3 NPG. A win against Stanford, maybe the toughest game on the schedule given Cincinnati's and Pitt's underperformance, would lift UCF's expected record to 11-1.

Meanwhile, ★ **#24 USC travels to BYU (ABC 3:30)** in a dangerous trap game sandwiched between Stanford and Pac-12 favorite Utah. BYU poured more dirt on Tennessee's season in dramatic fashion, forcing overtime late and crushing the spirit of the Volunteers on a pile-driving victory run into the endzone. The early success of USC QB Kedon Slovis has already been mentioned; on the other side, look for signs of a return to form for BYU sophomore Zach Wilson, who was excellent as a freshman but has been inefficient in some tough games so far.

Predictions
Stanford 24
#17 UCF 36

#24 USC 34
BYU 25

The afternoon headliner, ★ ★ **#19 Iowa at Iowa State (FS1 4:00)**, is an annual rivalry taking on new life and national attention this year, including a debut appearance of ESPN Gameday in Ames. A game that often delivers regardless of the rankings (or lack thereof), the 2019 vintage is especially appealing, mixing all the right ingredients for a classic: ranked or on-the-cusp teams, both undefeated (although ISU's 1-0 was harder earned than Cyclone fans had hoped), experienced QBs, and strong defenses.

Cyclone QB Brock Purdy excelled as a freshman (89; A) and maybe did not garner the national recognition he deserved. Reasonable caution about the Iowa State offense heading into 2019 revolved around replacing his top skill players: RB David Montgomery and WR Hakeem Butler. But defensively there is a lot to be excited about, starting with a front seven that was best in the Big XII a year ago (85 DL; 78 LB) and returned just about everyone but B+ LB Willie Harvey.

Iowa, steady as they come under the longtime guidance of HC Kirk Ferentz, is outpacing early expectations so far on defense, yielding a full touchdown less per game than anticipated by prediction

models. Those kinds of statistics often revert to the mean, but given ISU's offensive inconsistency versus Northern Iowa--as good as they are in the FCS--and continuing issues in the kicking game, some concern about being able to finish drives against one of the nation's most reliable defenses is warranted.

Iowa's advantage in the kicking game causes me to flip my preseason prediction, but regardless of the outcome, this points-at-a-premium contest should come down to the bitter end.

Prediction
#19 Iowa 23
Iowa State 21

It could be opportunity lost as ★★ **Kentucky hosts #9 Florida (ESPN 7:00)** without QB Terry Wilson, who has never been spectacular but has led the Wildcats to a 12-3 record as a starter. An offense with a run-first mentality, Kentucky will need to rely on its solid front five to create a push against the Florida defensive line. The Gators defense will be tough to crack for Kentucky, but one edge is that Florida's strength is back-to-front and plays better in pass defense (+10.5 NPG) than rush defense (+2.3 NPG).

Troy transfer Sawyer Smith will get the nod in Wilson's place and at least brings experience to the table, although he is not as active a runner as Wilson. I still believe Kentucky, at home, can keep this game close, since they do not necessarily need to rely on the passing game to move the chains. The chance to leapfrog the Gators in the standings, however, may have been knocked out alongside Wilson.

The vultures are circling for Florida State HC Willie Taggart, who needs a big win and will have to hit the road to nab one (★ **Florida State at #25 Virginia, ACCN 7:30**) and turn the Seminole season around. There's no positive way to spin FSU's struggles so far, which include blowing a large first-half lead against Boise State in Tallahassee and nearly being knocked out by ULM in Week 2. A loss in Charlottesville against Coastal favorite Virginia would drop FSU's expected record to 6-6, which may be too generous, given the close nature of the win against ULM. The chances of missing a bowl game--again--would ratchet up to 45%, and it's hard to imagine Taggart surviving two seasons home for the holidays at a program with the pedigree and talent level of Florida State.

The Cavalier pass defense has been excellent (+18.3 NPG) through two games, but their rush defense has shown some vulnerability (-0.9 NPG) thus far, especially considering one opponent was FCS William & Mary. This is an area that FSU can potentially exploit, particularly if OC Kendal Briles gets into a playcalling rhythm early that pressures the UVA front seven and keeps Bronco Mendenhall's defenders on their heels.

Virginia, in the driver's seat to face Clemson in the ACC Championship, can't take this one for granted. Florida State, for all its early struggles, is still dangerous enough to beat any team in the ACC Coastal.

Predictions
 #9 Florida 30
Kentucky 23

Florida State 22
#25 Virginia 31

The night winds down, as usual, on the West Coast (**Texas Tech at Arizona, ESPN 10:30**). In Week 1, Hawai'i dealt a body blow to Arizona's season, dropping their record expectation from 6-6 in the preseason to 4-8 after a loss that was uglier stylistically, perhaps, than it was on the final scoreboard. The offensive playcalling of the Wildcats continues to perplex, with the strong ground game options of QB Khalil Tate and RB J.J. Taylor seemingly brushed off as an afterthought to a pass-first system. That may work against Northern Arizona, but it cost the Wildcats on the islands.

Texas Tech remains untested, starting 2-0 against Montana State (95% preseason win probability) and UTEP (98%), so whatever statistics they have piled up to this point are not very predictive against better competition. Considering the full coaching staff turnover under new HC Matt Wells, it may take a few more games to start forming a clearer picture of this Red Raider team. On paper, they projected into 2019 as a balanced but mediocre P5 team, in SOS-adjusted scoring offense (#42) and defense (#44), which is not good enough to break out of the bottom half of the Big XII. Alan Bowman played well in Kliff Kingsbury's QB-friendly Air Raid last year (76; B+) but will operate a different system in 2019 and will likely regress in terms of quarterback efficiency.

As a measuring stick, this nonconference matchup may leave us with as many questions as answers, but it's almost certainly more important for Arizona, who should be farther along than Tech at this point. However, the real possibility of a 1-2 start would further dim whatever hope remains for Kevin Sumlin's tenure, dropping Arizona's projected record to a white-hot-seat 3-9.

Prediction
Texas Tech 37
Arizona 33