

College Football Viewer's Guide: Week 4

A statistical overview of the week in college football

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It took all afternoon and well into the evening after a series of intermittent weather delays, and it delivered in all the expected ways but ended forgettably for Iowa State, whose muffed punt return sealed yet another consecutive win for Iowa in the CyHawk series.

It took a change at quarterback, unfortunately forced by injury, to give Florida the jolt they needed in a game to that point controlled by Kentucky, whose two-score lead seemed insurmountable for the punchless Gator offense. But Kyle Trask appears to be, quite simply, the better QB (Franks was a 48th percentile player a year ago and has performed about that level again in 2019) and gives Florida a more efficient trigger man moving forward.

Maryland didn't survive against Temple; USC didn't survive against BYU; Penn State did survive against Pitt, whose defense played admirably and made life miserable for Sean Clifford--and no, Pat Narduzzi, the decision to kick that field goal was a bad one and considerably reduced your team's chance of springing the upset. And Michigan State's anemic offense is the saddest waste of a great defense in college football this season, costing them against Arizona State and I-surprised-everybody head coach Herm Edwards.

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 4 brings a series of heavy-hitters, reintroducing several ★★★ games, indicating serious impact on the New Year's Six picture, after an exhilarating Week 3 of college football that only lacked in high-ranked matchups. After three weeks of more conservative predictions, I'm calling for a few more upsets than normal, as early-season overachievers come down to Earth and underperformers reaffirm their preseason potential in some of the weekend's biggest games.

Thursday, September 19

Thursday night college football returns in Week 4 with a battle for positioning between **Houston and Tulane (ESPN 8:00)** in the American West division. The visiting Cougars get a chance to regroup after battling through an unforgiving nonconference schedule that included Oklahoma and Washington State, two ranked and undefeated teams through the first few weeks. That doesn't make it easy, as the Green Wave have played good football so far, starting with a convincing win over FIU in the opener. Tulane and HC Willie Fritz are known for their committed ground game, averaging +11.1 NPG (net points/game)

through three games--almost exactly equal to Houston's +11.2--but have surprised defensively, turning in an impressive +13.0 NPG against a schedule that also included Auburn.

Houston QB D'Eriq King has been name-dropped more than once in this space in September, but Tulane QB Justin McMillan is also an excellent runner, promising an electric matchup of dual-threat quarterbacks. The Wave also feature a pair of good backs in Darius Bradwell and Corey Dauphine, both B to B+ grade players a year ago--although Bradwell has started slowly this season. Defensively for Tulane, safeties Larry Brooks (91; A) and P.J. Hall (80; A-) are playing at an all-conference caliber.

While Houston's pass defense hasn't rated well so far--to be expected when playing some of the best passing attacks (Oklahoma; Washington State) in college football--their rush defense has generally held up okay. In a fairly even contest, I think the Cougars will force Tulane's run-heavy offense off the field just enough times to escape with a road win.

Prediction

Tulane 30

Houston 33

Friday, September 20

It's a Friday night blitz of cross-country conference play, all kicking off in close succession.

First up is **FIU at Louisiana Tech (CBSSN 8:00)** in a C-USA clash that features two teams I favored to meet in the conference championship in December. FIU's 1-2 start has soured those hopes, dropping their expected record from 9-3 to 6-6 and putting them at a disadvantage in the C-USA East race versus competitors like Marshall and Florida Atlantic. Louisiana Tech has held serve, winning the games they should (Grambling; Bowling Green) after dropping the opener at Texas. The Bulldogs feature a pair of strong corners, Amik Robertson (87; A) and Aaron Roberson (84; A-) that will continue to make life difficult for FIU's struggling pass offense (-4.4 NPG). When Tech is on offense, the Golden Panthers counter with a pair of two-way linebackers, Sage Lewis and Jamal Gates, who have combined for 24% of FIU's total defensive impact.

An hour later, two critical games with major divisional championship and even New Year's Six consequences kick off simultaneously: ★ **Air Force at #20 Boise State (ESPN2 9:00)** and ★★ ★ **#10 Utah at USC (FS1 9:00)**.

The former pits the two teams I slotted as the two MWC Mountain favorites heading into the season, going against the consensus choice of Utah State as #2 in that division, mostly due to an easier MWC West crossover schedule for the Falcons. Coming off an enormous overtime victory in Boulder--a week after the Buffaloes had won an overtime game there against the preseason-ranked Nebraska Cornhuskers--HC Troy Calhoun's squad has shown it can compete against teams with higher recruiting profiles. Colorado had about an 18-point advantage in expected power rating when factoring in recruiting alone; Boise State's edge is about 16 points. But the service academies make up for talent deficiencies with system, execution, and discipline.

Boise State, led by promising young QB Hank Bachmeier (72; B+) and a sturdy-as-usual defense (+8.8 NPG), are deserving favorites but could easily find themselves in a four-quarter battle with fewer

possessions than normal, given Air Force's ability to eat clock with the option offense, which is always a boon for the underdog.

Three stars may seem weighty coming off USC's loss to BYU, but the stakes could not be higher for Utah, as the current Pac-12 CFP favorite hits the road to face one of its two biggest obstacles of the season, along with a November 2nd trip to Washington. Put another way, with a victory, Utah's expected record improves to 11-1, equal to perennial playoff participant Alabama's.

And unlike USC, HC Kyle Whittingham's Utes have had few missteps in 2019, beating that same BYU team and taking care of business against a couple overmatched opponents: Northern Illinois and Idaho State. A surprise concern is special teams play, which has been consistently superlative under Whittingham's tenure but has registered as a major negative through three games (-4.7 NPG). Also, penalties have worked against Utah (-3.3 NPG). These are areas that usually don't hurt a Whittingham team; a reversion to the mean is not unrealistic here, but if USC has an angle, it could be exploiting an advantage in these hidden phases of the game. To be clear, the Trojans haven't been great in these dimensions (combined -0.5 NPG), but they have been significantly better than the Utes.

It's no secret that the "talent" level favors USC: the recruiting-based power rating is 11 points higher for the Men of Troy. But there are innumerable examples of paper-tiger teams who don't get it done on Saturdays...or Fridays, in this case. Utah is more polished both offensively and defensively, rests on a much sounder program foundation, and is the Pac-12 standard-bearer in 2019, but they are also not a year-in, year-out machine that can absorb too many mistakes. USC, at home, despite its loss versus a common opponent and a young QB growing into the position, is going to give Utah all they can handle on their quest to the playoff. Close call: give me the Utes in a classic (setting up a seismic collision with likely-to-be-undefeated Washington State next week in Salt Lake City).

Predictions

FIU 32

Louisiana Tech 31

Air Force 28

#20 Boise State 41

#10 Utah 28

USC 27

Saturday, September 21

Let's start (briefly) with what might be the lowest-scoring game of the year: **Michigan State at Northwestern (ABC 12:00)**. Two teams that play excellent defense and are almost embarrassingly inept on offense should make for a morbidly interesting brick wall vs brick wall battle. Who gives first? Who scores a pair of touchdowns to salt this one? I believe the Spartans have more offensive potential in a game that will test the patience of any casual observer.

Prediction

Michigan State 17

Northwestern 3

Of course, that Big Ten matchup takes an obvious backseat to ★★ ★ **#11 Michigan at #13 Wisconsin (FOX 12:00)**. The second three-star clash of the day is a tale of two trajectories, as the Badgers have given up literally nothing (zero points allowed) while steamrolling South Florida and Central Michigan, while the perennially hyped Wolverines have played sloppy, uninspired football in a win against Middle Tennessee and an overtime win against Army. Specifically, Michigan can't seem to hold onto the football. That hasn't been the only problem for HC Jim Harbaugh, as both the rush offense (-2.2 NPG) and rush defense (-2.3 NPG) have underperformed.

Questions have swirled about Harbaugh for several years now, as he hasn't delivered in the Big Ten East nor against top-ranked competition. On paper, he and his staff (A+ overall grade, according to my efficiency ratings) are elite, and yet something continues to be missing. Eventually, the results against top-notch competition need to be realized, and here Harbaugh has a golden opportunity, not just because Wisconsin is a good and high-ranked team, but because Wisconsin may be overvalued at this point in the season. The national perception of a road win in Madison would prove momentous and shake a few monkeys off Harbaugh's back.

To get there, QB Shea Patterson has to hold onto the ball, for one thing, and help from WR Donovan Peoples-Jones--if returned from injury--is desperately needed. RB Zach Charbonnet is solid; WR Nico Collins continues to be all-conference caliber.

Defensively, Michigan has a tough task before them, containing prolific RB Jonathan Taylor (96; A+). My bigger question is about the Wisconsin offensive line, which has been solid but is relatively inexperienced, as it faces an entirely different level of defensive front compared to what they've seen thus far. I think the Wolverine defense will exploit Wisconsin's untested OL, the offense will take better care of the football, Badger QB Jack Coan will struggle against a superior defense, and I will call for the road dog upset in one of Saturday's three biggest games.

Prediction

#11 Michigan 36
#13 Wisconsin 29

Elsewhere in the noon slot, ★ **#23 California at Ole Miss (ESPNU 12:00)** showcases the AP-newcomer Golden Bears in a cross-country road trip. Cal, once the fertile training ground of future NFL quarterbacks, has had its identity redefined by HC Justin Wilcox as a nasty defensive team, and already it has paid dividends (Week 2 upset at Washington).

Offensively, though, there is still work to do, and the newly minted Bears could get hit by a southeastern bullet in their long trek to Ole Miss if they can't get their pass offense (-3.3 NPG) off the ground.

Prediction

#23 California 17
Ole Miss 21

The second top-rated game of the day kicks off in the afternoon, ★★ ★ **#8 Auburn at #17 Texas A&M (CBS 3:30)**, a game that doesn't uplift either team into Alabama's stratosphere but at least keeps them breathing in the suffocating atmosphere of the SEC West. If you are Auburn or A&M and want a crack at the New Year's Six, you better win this game, for the loser is almost certainly eliminated in a division that includes not only the Tide but also LSU, led by recently anointed Heisman contender Joe Burrow.

Auburn, of course, is the team that still has it all laid out for them after their Week 1 win over Oregon. The problem is they are actually the underdog to the Aggies, and in this, I agree with the oddsmakers--although I estimate it to be very close to a coin flip (about 51% win probability). Sure, Texas A&M lost and didn't seem particularly threatening (in the second half) to Clemson, but that is arguably the best team in the land.

When A&M is on offense, get a long look at Aggie freshman RB Isaiah Spiller (95; A+) and Tiger sophomore DB Roger McCreary (93; A+).

Auburn freshman QB Bo Nix (52; C+) became a star for his late-game heroics against Oregon, but he needs to be more consistent to be beat A&M. In the Aggie secondary, Rodney Elam and Myron Jones (both 94; A+) will challenge Nix's passing and could swing the game for Texas A&M.

Prediction

#8 Auburn 24

#17 Texas A&M 25

During commercial breaks, work in a couple meaningful nonconference games: ★ **#22 Washington at BYU (ABC/ESPN2 3:30)** and ★★ **#15 UCF at Pittsburgh (ABC/ESPN2 3:30)**.

Upsets are possible in both games, as BYU has already proven its ability to take down P5 competition, and Pitt, though unconvincing offensively, displayed a defensive fortitude in Happy Valley that can at least cause UCF's offensive machine to sputter and stop a few times. Both underdogs are at home, giving them both a puncher's chance.

In a loaded timeslot--as becomes the norm as conference plays kicks into gear--keep an eye on some other scores throughout the land. **Kentucky at Mississippi State (SECN 4:00)** pits a pair of solid mid-tier SEC teams in a critical game for each team's bowl hopes. **South Carolina at Missouri (SECN 4:00)** is a chance for the Gamecocks to resuscitate their dying season. And in the Big XII, **West Virginia at Kansas (ESPN+ 4:30)** is no gimme for the Mountaineers...just ask Boston College.

Predictions

#22 Washington 29

BYU 20

#15 UCF 31

Pittsburgh 35

Kentucky 19

Mississippi State 26

South Carolina 33

Missouri 34

West Virginia 24

Kansas 21

★ **#16 Oregon at Stanford (ESPN 7:00)** witnesses a bleeding Cardinal team fortify in its last stand for respectability in 2019. The rich history of this game is reason enough to tune in; and despite their 1-2 record, Stanford still has a real chance at notching an upset in this Pac-12 North rivalry.

Make no mistake: Oregon is the better team. The Ducks are net positive in the four primary phases of the game--rush offense/defense, pass offense/defense--while the Cardinal are net negative in three of the four and barely positive at +0.1 NPG in the other (rush defense).

But Stanford HC David Shaw and the Stanford staff (95; A+) are some of the best in the business, and you can't count them out, at home, just yet.

A half hour later, ★★ **Oklahoma State at #12 Texas (ABC 7:30)** kicks off the most important Big XII game of the young season. While there is no doubt that the Oklahoma Sooners, led by lock-of-a-Heisman-finalist Jalen Hurts, are the class of the Big XII conference, the scrum for a slot in the championship game involves a slew of teams. The Cowboys and Longhorns are two of the primary contenders, along with the Cyclones and Horned Frogs, and the result of this direct clash will catapult one into a prime position while relegating the loser to an also-ran status.

How much is at stake? A 2-2 Texas team is at risk of not even making a bowl game (6-6 expected record; 31% chance of 5-7 or worse). Oklahoma State doesn't have the same stakes in a loss, but in a win, their prognosis gets quite interesting: from an 8-4 preseason projection to a 10-2 updated expectation. That puts them in serious contention for the Big XII Championship game.

And then there's the big one: ★★★ **#7 Notre Dame at #3 Georgia (CBS 8:00)**. The game of the night and the day and the weekend, it's as clearly a College Football Playoff ramification game as you can get. If Notre Dame wins, they elevate to a CFP short-lister...with games against Virginia, USC, and at Michigan as the only serious remaining obstacles.

But that is a huge IF. Georgia is, on paper at least, the better team. The recruiting advantage the Irish enjoy against most opponents is wiped out against the Bulldogs, who actually have a four-point advantage in recruiting-based power rating, so it comes down to coaching and development. On that front, Kirby Smart's staff (93; A+) have the slight edge over Brian Kelly's (86; A). And Georgia is playing at home, which is worth close to a field goal, on average.

Irish stars QB Ian Book (91; A) and RB Tony Jones Jr. (80; A-) must have big games, and the OL has to get a better push than it has so far. This will be an area to watch, as Georgia DL Tyler Clark (67; B) has been solid but hasn't been helped much by those around him.

Predictions

#16 Oregon 31
Stanford 23

Oklahoma State 32
#12 Texas 39

#7 Notre Dame 22
#3 Georgia 33

After the big games wind down, don't call it a night just yet, as a pair of significant conference games take the field.

Colorado at #24 Arizona State (P12N 10:00) is an opportunity for the Buffaloes to undo the damage of their OT loss to Air Force by marching up the Pac-12 South standings. Reasonably, the expectations for the Buffs in HC Mel Tucker's first year weren't high--a loss to Air Force is balanced out by a victory over Nebraska--and a 1-0 start in conference play would be a huge step forward for the program.

The Sun Devils, memorably, are returning home after a controversial win in East Lansing, knocking off one of the very best defenses in the nation. Before the 2018 season, HC Herm Edwards was laughed off by many, but instead of caring about critics he has led his team to a solid 10-6 record. The style of game will be different this week, though, as the Buffaloes are almost like MSU's opposite, bringing a dangerous offense to the field while remaining vulnerable on defense.

In a game that could turn into a shootout, anything could happen.

Prediction

Colorado 21

#24 Arizona State 30

Don't overlook the Week 4 finale: ★ **Utah State at San Diego State (CBSSN 10:30)**, a clash between a pair of the Mountain West's best teams, both of whom have their sights set on not only the MWC Championship but potentially the New Year's Six Group of Five slot. The story of this matchup is an offensive powerhouse (Utah State: +24.0 NPG) versus a defensive stalwart (San Diego State: +17.9 NPG).

In the end, after a long day full of some great games, I'll take the home team.

Prediction

Utah State 20

San Diego State 25