

College Football Viewer's Guide: Week 5

A statistical overview of the week in college football

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Holding a comfortable 42 to 17 lead over punchless UCLA past the midway point of the third quarter, unbeaten Washington State could safely start looking ahead to its upcoming trip to Utah. And then it all imploded, from kick returns to turnovers lighting the first spark of life for Chip Kelly's down-and-out Bruins. The surge and wild shootout culminated in a dramatic 67-63 salvation for a drowning UCLA program that suddenly has everything to play for (more on that below).

Another big upset--called for in the Week 4 Viewer's Guide but probably nowhere else--was a pendulum-swinging bout of opportunity gained and lost and gained again, as Pitt raced out to a 21-0 lead over UCF, squandered that advantage over the next couple of frames as their kicking woes continued, before claiming victory on one of college football's plays of the year: an all-or-nothing reverse pass to the QB on 4th and goal. It was a redemption moment for HC Pat Narduzzi, who deserves credit for greenlighting an aggressive playcall to deliver UCF's first regular-season loss since 2016 after shrinking from the spotlight with an ill-advised goal-line FG attempt in a Week 3 loss at Penn State.

Recapping the consequences of Week 4's abundance of ★★ ★ games:

The Pac-12 South cannibalized its best hope as USC, despite turning to their #3 QB after an injury to Kedon Slovis, threw and threw and threw their way to an upset and, at the very end, got a few positive run plays to ice preseason favorite Utah. Michigan embarrassed itself at the claws of the Badgers and continues to monumentally underachieve, assuring questions about HC Jim Harbaugh's future will plague him throughout 2019; meanwhile, Big Ten hopes Wisconsin and Ohio State appear destined for one of the games of the year on October 26th at the Horseshoe. Notre Dame, for all their valiant defensive efforts and near-miss at Georgia, is virtually eliminated from the playoff due to few remaining chances to impress the committee, as future opponents like Michigan, Virginia Tech, and Stanford have underperformed, and no conference championship avails itself to the Independent. And Auburn, with quality wins over Oregon and now Texas A&M, has locked itself into position as a major CFP force in the only CFB division (SEC West) that has a real chance at ticketing two teams for the bracket.

Week 5 is more about conference positioning than clashes of titans: only two ranked teams face off, but the stage is set for a number of competitive, consequential ★ matchups (the most so far this year) for teams up and down the Top 25 and beyond.

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.

Thursday, September 26

Navy at Memphis (ESPN 8:00) kicks off the week in only the Midshipmen's third game of the year, after an unusual pair of early-season byes. Relatively unchallenged so far (wins versus Holy Cross and East Carolina), and given the usual low-continuity production ranks of service academy teams (#110 offense; #120 defense), not too much is yet known about this Navy squad. QB Malcolm Perry is a known quantity and continues to efficiently operate the option offense (71st percentile in 2018; 74th percentile through two games in 2019).

While the Navy offense is usually a reliable, high-execution unit, it's the defensive side that holds them back against the firepower of an American favorite like Memphis, capable of putting up big offense in a hurry. QB Brady White has been decent (54; B+) but, based on his performance history, is expected to improve. The stars of the Tiger offense so far have been the RB tandem of Kenneth Gainwell (90; A) and Kylan Watkins (90; A), who have teamed up to admirably replace the lost production of elite RB Darrell Henderson.

Navy's best hope is to possess the football for long stretches and minimize the number of possessions in the game, which requires staying on schedule and converting 3rd and short to mid opportunities. If Memphis snuffs out too many Navy drives in Midshipmen territory, the Tigers will pounce relentlessly.

Prediction

Navy 25

Memphis 45

Friday, September 27

Three P5 conference matchups pepper an eventful Friday night, starting with **Duke at Virginia Tech (ESPN 7:00)**. This is a must-win game for Hokie HC Justin Fuente to stay relevant in the ACC Coastal race. Dropping to 0-2 conference--after a season-opening loss at Boston College--erases Tech from the 2019 conversation entirely, plunging their conference record expectation to a dismal 2-6 with a trip home for the holidays most likely. Duke, on the other hand, has the opportunity to lift itself into the divisional race from a preseason slot in the bottom tier.

This matchup pits strength versus strength: the best offensive unit on the field is Duke's passing game (+8.5 NPG, or net points per game), while the best stop unit is VT's pass defense (+6.0 NPG). Homefield advantage gives the Hokies a boost and the slight edge.

Prediction

Duke 26

Virginia Tech 30

Be ready to catch the kickoff of ★ **#12 Penn State at Maryland (FS1 8:00)** in the feature primetime game. Maryland, under new boss Mike Locksley, was one of CFB's surprise stories after the first two weeks as they raced out to an obscene 70+ points per game offensively, including an annihilation of a ranked Syracuse team. Then the Temple defense ground the Terrapin offense to dust in a Week 3 takedown...and that same Owl team lost in ugly fashion to Buffalo in Week 4. All these incoherent

results paint a muddled picture of the Maryland football team and what to expect after an extra week of rest.

Penn State also had a bye week, so the rest factor cancels out, after surviving a scare against a Pitt team in a result that looks better after the Panther upset of UCF than it did in Week 3. In hindsight, holding on for that win may resonate as a solid nonconference victory, rather than a blemish, on the PSU resume.

On balance, Maryland's defeat to Temple seems like a reality check to a flash-in-the-pan start. PSU QB Sean Clifford will need better protection than his line mustered against Pitt's active front and should get it. Sharing the backfield with skilled RBs Journey Brown (84; A-) and Noah Cain (87; A) and possessing perhaps the best TE in the Big Ten in Pat Freiermuth (84; A-), expect the Nittany Lion offense to roar back to life and relegate that electric Maryland start to the memory banks.

Prediction

#12 Penn State 35

Maryland 21

Likely the game of the night in the late slot (**★ ★ Arizona State at #15 California, ESPN 10:30**) as the rollercoaster ride of the Pac-12 continues to threaten every team that rises to the top. The stunner of the conference is that going into Week 5, only Cal remains unbeaten, having survived a questionable officiating fiasco when Ole Miss appeared to have scored a potentially game-tying TD, only to be marked short and be denied a review as they had to scramble to run a final play. Regardless of your take on the call, the Golden Bears survived and advance as an unlikely CFP contender (only a 1-in-250 chance of making the playoff in the preseason).

Cal, who will utilize QB Chase Garbers extensively in the run game, may struggle to move the ball on the ground consistently against a Sun Devil rush defense worth +6.4 NPG, led by LBs Khaylan Kearsse-Thomas (79; A-) and Darien Butler (78; A-). Arizona State, particularly strong in the kicking game, also has a game-changing +5.5 NPG advantage in special teams over Cal, which could swing the result on the road, especially in a tight defensive battle.

Prediction

Arizona State 20

#15 California 19

Saturday, September 28

Mismatches abound in the noon timeslot. A pair of Top 10 teams face outgunned visitors in conference games: **Texas Tech at #6 Oklahoma (FOX 12:00)** and **★ Northwestern at #8 Wisconsin (ABC 12:00)**.

With Red Raider QB Alan Bowman out for the foreseeable future, any longshot upset bid is preemptively erased, as Texas Tech will not be able to keep pace with the Formula One racecar that is the Oklahoma offense, led by likely Heisman finalist Jalen Hurts.

As unlikely as it seems, given Northwestern's offensive ineptitude and the meteoric trajectory of the Wisconsin Badgers, there is an off chance Pat Fitzgerald's Wildcats could keep things competitive in Madison on the strength of their defense. The domino effect to upsetting Wisconsin is to play stout run

defense that limits RB Jonathan Taylor's impact and forces QB Jack Coan to win through the air, hoping he reverts to his subpar 2018 passing efficiency levels.

That's a tall order, and it's entirely possible Northwestern fails to find the endzone on the road against a much better team, so just about everything would have to go right for them to hang around deep into the second half. But I do believe Northwestern will make a much better showing defensively than Michigan mustered in Week 4, challenging the Badgers for the first time in 2019, if not necessarily threatening them.

The best early games are more likely to be off the radar, such as **BYU at Toledo (ESPN+ 12:00)** and **★ Buffalo at Miami OH (ESPNU 12:00)**. The former, while having no conference or rankings implications, is yet another challenging game in the unrelenting schedule BYU faces in 2019, as Toledo is among the top G5 teams in the country. The latter is a significant MAC East clash between two teams that are in contention for the division crown, especially given preseason frontrunner Ohio's early-season lapse. Buffalo is coming off a huge win over Temple, while Miami can be forgiven for a 1-3 start given the schedule (Iowa, Cincinnati, Ohio State). The winner of this game becomes one of the favorites to represent the East in the MAC Championship Game.

If you are on the lookout for competitive football in a weak slot and don't mind finding it in the MAC, then you should be rewarded checking out either of these games, especially if the Big XII and Big Ten games become lopsided in the first halves.

Predictions

Texas Tech 28

#6 Oklahoma 51

Northwestern 15

#8 Wisconsin 28

BYU 33

Toledo 31

Buffalo 27

Miami OH 33

The dearth of quality matchups early is subsequently filled by a richness of competitive, meaningful contests in the afternoon, starting with two of the biggest games of the weekend: **★★ #18 Virginia at #10 Notre Dame (NBC 3:30)** and **★★ #21 USC at #17 Washington (FOX 3:30)**.

Virginia was riding high this season, already sitting pretty at 2-0 in conference (Pittsburgh, Florida State) until facing unexpected adversity at home at the hands of Old Dominion, who charged out to a commanding 17-0 second-quarter lead, mostly dominating the game until that point, before the quality of the Cavaliers asserted itself in the second half en route to a 28-17 victory. A trip to Notre Dame affords them a fantastic opportunity to put that scare behind them and elevate themselves to another level: a win against the Irish increases their expected record to 11-1 and improves their chance to go undefeated in the regular season to about 28%. Despite the lackluster showing versus ODU, the Cavaliers are capable of winning this game on the road. Of course, capable is not the same as likely; the

Irish defense, unless it suffers a letdown performance after the tough loss, has the talent and ability to stonewall the Virginia offense.

Meanwhile, Washington remains one of the Pac-12's two most likely teams, along with Oregon, to make the playoff--Cal, though currently undefeated, is more likely to suffer multiple losses by the end of November. Though both Washington and Oregon have a blemish on their records, a long season remains, and if either make it to 12-1 conference champions, they will likely be very much in the discussion when all is said and done. USC, despite coming off an enormous triumph over preseason Pac-12 favorite Utah, has serious question marks about their long-term endurance. The Trojans are down to their #3 QB. Their run game was almost nonexistent against the Utes. While they were able to spring the upset in gunslinging, explosive-play fashion in Week 4, that is not a formula for continued success, especially considering Washington's defensive strength is in pass defense (+8.7 NPG).

Predictions

#18 Virginia 18

#10 Notre Dame 28

#21 USC 26

#17 Washington 29

A host of other significant starred games kick off simultaneously.

In the ACC, ★ **Wake Forest at Boston College (ACCN 3:30)** should be a close-fought divisional battle between two teams with different styles: Wake under the guidance of QB Jamie Newman is best through the air, while BC leans on prolific RB AJ Dillon.

In the Big XII, ★ **Iowa State at Baylor (ESPN 3:30)** elevates the winner into the top half of the conference race (6-3 expected conference record) and drops the loser into the bottom half (4-5 expected conference record).

In the Big Ten, ★ **Indiana at #25 Michigan State (BTN 3:30)** is an opportunity for the Hoosiers to knock off a ranked foe, as they have played pretty well other than a lopsided loss at Ohio State. Elsewhere, ★ **Minnesota at Purdue (ESPN2 3:30)** is a golden opportunity for the Golden Gophers to keep their barely-undefeated record intact, given the uncertainty of the Boilermaker QB situation, as Elijah Sindelar continues to work through the concussion protocol.

Predictions

Wake Forest 33

Boston College 31

Iowa State 28

Baylor 26

Indiana 15

#25 Michigan State 28

Minnesota 31

Purdue 30

Two more Top 10 teams take the field in primetime: ★ ★ **Mississippi State at #7 Auburn (ESPN 7:00)** and ★ **#5 Ohio State at Nebraska (ABC 7:30)**.

Mississippi State, under the guidance of freshman QB Garrett Shrader (after the injury to Tommy Stevens) rebounded from their home loss to Kansas State by notching a conference win against Kentucky, who should have beaten Florida the week prior. RB Kylin Hill (80; A-) is the feature player of the run-based offense (+9.4 NPG).

On the opposite offense, Auburn also leans on the run game (+8.3 NPG) behind an 83rd percentile offensive line. When the Tigers keep it on the ground, watch Bulldog safety Brian Cole II from the back and defensive end Marquiss Spencer from the front--State's top two run defenders in 2019--who will be counted on to contain the Auburn rush attack. Through the air, Willie Gay Jr. rates among the best coverage linebackers in the country, seamlessly continuing his success from 2018.

Auburn is the solid favorite and should be, but this team isn't impervious. Celebrated freshman QB Bo Nix (48; C+) has a high ceiling but is only performing at an average level, overall, which must improve if Auburn is to survive the rigors of the SEC West. Mississippi State, with its solid secondary, has a chance to turn the game in the Bulldogs' favor if Nix is off the mark.

In the Midwest, first-year HC Ryan Day's Buckeyes invade Lincoln riding an early-season hot streak, having bested their opponents by a far greater margin than expected in the preseason. Remarkably, Ohio State's performance to this point has outpaced what would have been expected had Urban Meyer remained as head coach. HC Day deserves credit for handling the transition and excelling on the field.

Nebraska, under second-year HC Scott Frost, has found its way to about where it should be (3-1), although it felt disappointing in the opening games, between a soft win versus South Alabama and an overtime loss at Colorado. QB Adrian Martinez continues to be one of the most impactful players in college football (32% offensive impact in 2019; 30% in 2018), but he's also been inconsistent (58; B-).

Opposite Martinez, transfer sensation and dual-threat Justin Fields (97; A+; 26% impact) continues to excel every week. In a QB confrontation first anticipated in the Week 1 Viewer's Guide, Fields has lived up to the billing, while Martinez has been spotty in his play.

Special teams are a surprising negative for both blue-blood programs that typically fare better in the third phase. Both teams are stronger in pass defense; whoever can consistently move the ball on the ground has the advantage in this Big Ten battle.

During commercial breaks, flip over (if you have it) to **#24 Kansas State at Oklahoma State (ESPN+ 7:00)**. This should be a discussion of a quality matchup, but instead it's a question of how could a game of this magnitude be relegated to the add-on ESPN+ channel? The fast-forward analysis: despite KSU being the ranked team, I like the hometown Cowboys to notch a solid victory in this Big XII game.

Predictions

Mississippi State 16

#7 Auburn 24

#5 Ohio State 41

Nebraska 28

#24 Kansas State 25

Oklahoma State 36

The night rounds out with a pair of significant Pac-12 confrontations: ★ **Washington State at #19 Utah (FS1 10:00)** and ★ **UCLA at Arizona (ESPN 10:30)**.

After the notorious Cougar Collapse of Week 4, HC Mike Leach and his Washington State team should be plenty motivated to bring their best into a challenging road environment. Despite the loss at USC, Utah may still be the best team in the conference; beating a game challenger like Wazzou is the first step in the return to playoff relevance.

Remarkably, if USC has already lost to Washington at this point in the evening, UCLA takes the field with a chance to take sole position of first place in the Pac-12 South with a win over Arizona, an underachiever fraught with question marks. The very idea of Chip Kelly's Bruins in first place after all the death knells and obituaries is compelling in and of itself; the crazier reality is that they could hold the position for quite some time, as the future schedule will probably include only one ranked team (USC or Utah). Suddenly, this game has taken on enormous consequence for the Bruin program and Chip Kelly.

Predictions

Washington State 30

#19 Utah 35

UCLA 34

Arizona 33