College Football Viewer's Guide: Week 10
A statistical overview of the week in college football

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Upon further review, the football had prematurely glanced off an Oklahoma player, nullifying the onside kick recovery and salting the game for the home-team Kansas State Wildcats. The Sooner defense had been an improvement story in 2019, creating an air of destiny for a team whose offense could score points on any defense in the nation. But that defense collapsed in the run game, as KSU QB Skylar Thompson pummeled them on the ground and battered away at OU's perfect season.

That's good news for both Alabama and LSU, on a collision course in Week 11 (both have byes this week to prepare for college football's regular season game of the year), as it cracks opens the playoff door for the loser of that game, who would likely finish 11-1 but miss the SEC Championship. The Crimson Tide, led by backup QB Mac Jones, made short work of hapless Arkansas, demonstrating that at least against inferior competition that no Tua is no problem. LSU, on the other hand, traded punches with Auburn and their top-notch defense, and the battle-hardened bunch once again emerged victorious in a tight game, similarly to previous wins against Texas and Florida.

Speaking of the CFP, Big Ten favorite Ohio State and top challenger Penn State both impressed in their near-flawless takedowns, respectively, of once-heralded Wisconsin and once-hyped Michigan State (admittedly guilty on the latter account). I wrote earlier this season that, besides the SEC West, the only division with a real shot a two playoff teams was the Big Ten East. That remains true: an 11-1 Ohio State or Penn State may be appealing to the committee, once the butter churn of the regular season and the conference championships finishes its work.

> 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
>
> ★★ Important game with major conference or rankings implications
>
> ★★★ 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.

Late into the night, the CFB diehards were rewarded with one of the games of the day, as Washington State brought a 3-game losing streak but an upset mentality into Eugene, Oregon, and took a lead with about a minute left on a 4th-down TD connection between QB Anthony Gordon and WR Brandon Arconado. But HC Mike Leach and the Cougars failed to manage the clock effectively, wasting opportunities to run the clock down, and so doomed themselves to a last-second loss on a Duck field goal. Oregon remains in the playoff chase, but another test looms.

Week 10, though low on games (a whopping 34 teams have byes) and thin on depth, is top-heavy in its most significant matchups, from Cocktail Parties to potential Pac-12 chaos.

Thursday, October 31

Happy Halloween, college football fans, from the Viewer's Guide. In the Week 10 opener, **West Virginia at #12 Baylor (ESPN 8:00)**, things that go bump in the night or pick-your-favorite hexes and curses create an air of peril for the undefeated Bears, who have defied all preseason analytics and expectations to start 7-0 and sit, remarkably, atop the Big XII standings after Oklahoma's defeat.

Of course, as fun as they can be, ghost stories have no bearing on college football, and the real threat to Baylor is the overall parity of the conference, which has set the stage for nearly any team to upend any other team on the right day or night--especially so after Kansas has become a tough out (nearly beat Texas; beat Texas Tech in consecutive weeks) and the aforementioned Sooner shocker. There aren't any true "gimmes" left on the schedule for the teams clinging to threadbare leads. For Baylor, despite its perch atop the standings, this game is nearly a must-win to reach the conference championship: After West Virginia, the Bears follow up with a road trip to TCU and home games against Oklahoma and Texas. In terms of win expectation, a loss to the Mountaineers foretells two more, as the expected record slips to 9-3 (6-3), which may not be enough to stake a position in the top two of the round robin.

Alternatively (or during breaks), check out one of the marquee games of the season in the Sun Belt, ★ **Georgia Southern at #20 App State (ESPNU 8:00)**, as another (and better!) set of Mountaineers takes the field, vying to maintain their own perfect record. Between App State and Baylor, App State is more likely to finish unblemished (18% vs 13%, respectively), which keeps them very much alive for a New Year's Six berth. It will take some mutual destruction in the American Conference (Cincinnati; SMU; Memphis; UCF; Navy) and probably another loss by Boise State in the MWC, but App State can't be counted out until they actually lose a game.

Georgia Southern may not be App State's biggest threat in the conference--teams like Georgia State and Louisiana still lurk in the division and potentially in the conference championship--but they are a solid opponent coming off a breezy win versus New Mexico State. However, the Eagle rush offense isn't as strong as usual (+2.5 net points/game, or NPG), and their secondary is a liability against the well-rounded Mountaineer offense.

Peeking ahead, App State's biggest obstacle to remaining undefeated comes next week in a nonconference trip to South Carolina.

Predictions
West Virginia 22
#12 Baylor 38

Georgia Southern 20
#20 App State 32

Friday, November 1

There are currently no games scheduled for Fri...

Oh wait, there is *one* game on the docket: **Navy at UCONN (ESPN2 8:00)** kicks off the final month of the regular season and isn't much more than a speed bump for Ken Niumatololo's squad. Realistically,

UCONN--who notched their second win of the season last week against UMASS but is one of the worst teams in the FBS--has no shot in this game. The most significant aspect of this contest is that it represents such an easy crossover win for the Midshipmen, who has been overshadowed but is still alive in the American West race.

Between this mild tune-up and an ensuing bye week, Navy should be well-rested for its Week 12 trip to South Bend, Indiana, which should set up quite an intriguing matchup with the Irish, before a very significant home game against SMU in Week 13.

Prediction
Navy 41
UCONN 20

Saturday, November 2

The first November noon slate is a bit of a warmup jog, strangely bereft of important games. The best of the bunch, ★ **NC State at #23 Wake Forest (ESPN 12:00)**, pits disappointment versus surprise. The Wolfpack have underwhelmed, slipping to 4-3, while the Demon Deacons have overcome preseason expectations to notch a 6-1 record. Wake is the only team in the ACC Atlantic besides Clemson that controls their own destiny, and while (looking ahead) a Week 12 upset of the Tigers seems far-fetched, at least the Deacons have acquitted themselves well enough to be in a position that the game actually matters.

It starts with QB Jamie Newman, an 86th percentile passer, operating a pass offense worth nearly 15 NPG, fifth in the nation behind only offensive powerhouses Oklahoma, Alabama, LSU, and Washington State. NC State's coverage unit (+3.8 NPG) is solid, and while they may ultimately get overwhelmed by the Wake aerial attack, if they can tip the scales with a turnover or two, they could undercut the Deacon ascendancy.

Another game to keep an eye on is **Houston at UCF (ESPN2 12:00)**. In the preseason, this would've been billed as one of the games of the year in the American. Now, unfortunately, it's lost some of its luster, but UCF is too dangerous to count out of the conference championship. It would take a Cincinnati collapse (i.e., losses to Temple and Memphis) to open the door for the Knights, but as long as UCF and their explosive offense is alive, they are worth watching. If you like big offense, this is the game for you.

Predictions
NC State 27
#23 Wake Forest 34

Houston 33
UCF 48

After a lean start to the weekend, grab a drink and settle in for The World's Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party: ★★★ **#8 Georgia vs #6 Florida (CBS 3:30)**. The beauty of November football is games like this, where the stakes are clearly defined, the teams are the best in their division, and it simply comes down to who beats whom. Georgia and Florida are currently tied with an 11-1 regular season projection and

command the SEC East--whoever wins gets to play in the SEC Championship game versus either Alabama or LSU.

Georgia QB Jake Fromm (33; C-) has been a subject of conversation, given the Heisman-esque rise of former Bulldog Justin Fields at Ohio State. Fromm hasn't played well in 2019 but played at an A-grade level in 2018, adding to the intrigue. At RB, D'Andre Swift (96; A+) has been elite, and he should have a big day against the mediocre Gator rush defense (+0.6 NPG).

A weakness for Georgia is special teams, where they are hemorrhaging 3.5 NPG, an area Florida could exploit. This one should go down to the wire; I favor Georgia, with their relative advantage in the run game, to emerge victorious.

Another season-defining game kicks off a half hour later: ★★★ **#9 Utah at Washington (FOX 4:00)**. While the Huskies have underachieved on their way to a 5-3 record, they are still a strong team that is more than capable of winning at home against a playoff contender like Utah.

Maybe the biggest surprise about the Huskies is the softness of their rush defense (-6.2 NPG). DC Pete Kwiatkowski is one of the best in the business, but losing eight of his top eleven defenders from the 2018 squad took its toll. This is an area Utah--and especially sensational RB Zach Moss (98; A+)--can exploit.

A third game rotates in that wouldn't have been expected a few weeks ago, as newly ranked ★ **#22 Kansas State travels to Kansas (FS1 3:30),** showcasing a pair of Big XII teams on the rise. While Les Miles's Jayhawk squad will play more of a spoiler role in 2019, Chris Klieman's Wildcats leapfrogged (in record projection) several mid-table Big XII teams with their shock upset of conference favorite Oklahoma. But with Kansas no longer a pushover, KSU's surge into the rankings could be short-lived. Kansas RB Pooka Williams, Jr. has shouldered the ground game load (28% of KU's total rush offense), but keep an eye RB Khalil Herbert (89; A), who isn't utilized as a receiving outlet but is having an especially strong season carrying the football.

Predictions
#8 Georgia 29
#6 Florida 27

#9 Utah 27
Washington 21

#22 Kansas State 29
Kansas 23

Kickoffs staggered throughout the evening into late night punctuate Week 10, starting with ★★★ **#15 SMU at #24 Memphis (ABC 7:30)**, inarguably one of the most important G5 games of the year, certain to have New Year's Six implications. It's too bold to declare this the de facto American West Divisional Championship game, considering challenging opponents for each team remaining (SMU at Navy on Nov 23; Memphis vs Cincinnati on Nov 29), but the victor certainly claims an enviable pole position in the race that may be too much to overcome.

It sets up as an offensive firefight between two teams with refined passing games (Memphis +11.3 NPG; SMU +9.0 NPG) and solid complementary run games (Memphis +2.4; SMU +4.1). In special teams, Memphis has a distinct advantage, having outperformed SMU in the third phase by nearly a touchdown per game. The edge is pronounced in the kicking game, which could prove to be a liability for the undefeated Mustangs in a high-flying contest that demands opportunities be converted into points.

While the Pac-12 North is locked up, the Pac-12 South is still up for grabs, despite Utah's lofty ranking. ★★★ **#7 Oregon at USC (FOX 8:00)** represents a golden opportunity for the Trojans, at home, to advance their case. Utah rightly gets the buzz in the south as the only remaining playoff contender, but it's actually USC that holds the critical tiebreaker over the Utes. Given that both teams are sitting at 4-1 in conference and seem to be in a head-to-head battle for the right to play for the title, Utah desperately needs to gain a game on USC in Saturday's two-game exchange. If not, the Utes will be relying on someone like Arizona State or UCLA to elevate them into the conference championship.

The best chance of the Pac-12 reaching the playoff is a conference title game between 11-1 Utah and 11-1 Oregon, but there is a real possibility that USC fends off their South rivals and spoils the narrative.

While unlikely, the other team with an outside shot at the Pac-12 South crown, surprisingly enough, is resurgent UCLA. **Colorado at UCLA (P12N 9:00)** affords the Bruins a chance to score another conference win against a reeling program before back-to-back games against divisional co-favorites Utah and USC. Because of the way the schedule sets up, UCLA technically controls their own destiny, which is more than Utah can say.

The night concludes with **#21 Boise State at San Jose State (CBSSN 10:30)**, a good tune-up coming off a loss to BYU and a bye week before a tough home game against the 6-2 Wyoming Cowboys in Week 11. In 2018 or early in 2019, San Jose State's Week 9 win over Army would've been reason enough to sound the alarm for Boise; but, in reality, the 3-5 Black Knights are a shade of the 11-win outfit from a year ago. It was a good win for a bottom-tier MWC team, but Boise shouldn't have any problem dispatching the Spartans.

Predictions
#15 SMU 30
#24 Memphis 42

#7 Oregon 31
USC 28

Colorado 28
UCLA 34

#21 Boise State 41
San Jose State 22