College Football Viewer's Guide: Week 6
A statistical overview of the week in college football

@mcillecesports

The afternoon timeslot of Week 5 was perhaps the most memorable of the season. In last week's Viewer's Guide, I listed a spate of ★ games at 3:30, despite many of those teams being unranked, because I expected most of them to be competitive and consequential, and they certainly delivered.

Indiana took the Spartans to the wire and suffered the cruel indignity of a final-play defensive Spartan TD that extended the score, and Purdue, missing some of their best playmakers (QB Elijah Sindelar and star WR Rondale Moore, who will unfortunately miss the trip to Penn State), roared back against Minnesota, including the recovery of an onside kick, only to come up short in the Big Ten. The Iowa State Cyclones, dormant through three quarters, quickened to life in the fourth quarter, launching their own comeback bid--taking a stunning lead late after doing all their damage in the fourth quarter--before Baylor reclaimed victory on a final-minute field goal. Wake Forest and Boston College battled in anonymity on the ACC Network in a pivotal divisional matchup that saw the Deacons emerge as one of CFB's least-talked-about 5-0 teams, and who have now fully emerged as the primary Atlantic threat to Clemson--whose concerns continued to mount in a left-field challenge from UNC but hung on as the Tarheels came up short on a commendable two-point attempt to take a very late lead.

> 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.

[*A statistical soapbox about that two-point conversion attempt: I am behind Mack Brown on this one. Generally, heavy underdogs should take the opportunity to win it on a single play when given the chance. Taking a game to overtime extends the number of plays, which reduces variability and increases the probability that the better team will win, and despite the flow of the game, Clemson was still the superior team. Good for Mack for throwing up two fingers without any hesitation.*]

The big news in the evening wasn't the quality of the games but the lopsided nature of their outcomes. Top-ten clubs Auburn (over Mississippi State) and Ohio State (over Nebraska) made short work of legitimate if flawed competition, entrenching both in the quest for the playoff. Ohio State looked particularly lethal and now ranks as the best team in the country, according to my in-season power rating model, after disemboweling the Cornhuskers in grisly fashion under the Gameday lights in Lincoln.

As the calendar flips to October, FCS opponents drop off the slate completely, and Week 6 ushers in three ★★★ games (serious New Year's Six implications) from a Top-10 matchup, the aforementioned

Buckeyes facing a stiffer test against one of the nation's best defenses, and one of the season's critical Group of Five games.

Thursday, October 3

A soft Thursday commands the attention of only the most ardent of college football fans.

The week opens as **Georgia Southern travels to South Alabama (ESPNU 7:30)** in a cross-divisional Sun Belt tilt that will see one of its combatants prevail for their second victory of the season. Georgia Southern, despite its 1-3 record (losses to LSU, Minnesota, and Louisiana), still has life in the Sun Belt East. QB Shai Werts is back and is the player to watch for the first thirty minutes Thursday night: an exceptional ball-carrier and solid passer (91st percentile as a runner in 2018; 60 as a passer). South Alabama, meanwhile, is doomed to insignificance in 2019: even with a win, their expected record only rises to 3-9, and they remain the favorite to finish in the Sun Belt West cellar.

After warming up with Werts in the first quarter, flip over to **Temple at East Carolina (ESPN 8:00)** for an American East division kickoff. Temple has been a Jekyll (home) and Hyde (road) team in 2019: shocking the nation who had been shocked by Maryland's early-season success; stumbling in an inexplicable and uncompetitive loss at Buffalo; and dominating defensively, again, in an almost comical 24-2 home win over foundering Georgia Tech. Now conference play begins for the Owls, who have hopes of a division crown but are still a bit of question mark as they hit the road again.

East Carolina has been an afterthought in the American East division, given the G5 cachet of programs like UCF, Cincinnati, South Florida, and Temple, all ahead of the Pirates in the preseason conference predictions. But given Temple's letdown at Buffalo and USF's/Charlie Strong's downward spiral into ignominy, here's an opportunity, and it's not completely unrealistic that the ECU defense--led by OLB Gerard Stringer (92; A)--could grind down Temple's gears. An upset win for the home side may not change the climate of the American much, but it means potential bowl eligibility for the Pirates (6-6 expected record with win), and that is something to play for.

Predictions
Georgia Southern 35
South Alabama 20

Temple 31
East Carolina 20

Friday, October 4

One of the G5 headliners of the year, ★ ★ ★ **#18 UCF at Cincinnati (ESPN 8:00)**, enjoys the unobstructed attention of CFB fans across the country Friday night. Credit to the American for scheduling this clash so all can watch without Power Five interference.

Though neither team is unblemished--UCF was expected to be but dropped a rollercoaster at Pitt; Cincinnati was less competitive than expected in the Horseshoe vs the steamrolling Buckeyes--they still represent two of the very best G5 teams in the nation, and the winner is confirmed as one of the

likeliest party-crashers of the New Year's Six bowl games. The head-to-head win is critical as a potential tiebreaker to represent the East in the American Championship game, as well.

At the time, Cincinnati's lopsided loss at Ohio State portended an ill future against the best of the American, such as UCF and Memphis (Nov. 29). But as the Buckeyes have surged to the #1 power ranking in the land, the blemish has diminished, and a commanding 52-14 nonconference win at C-USA favorite Marshall in Week 5 has reaffirmed their position as a serious challenger to UCF. The strength of the Bearcats is on defense (+4.2 net points/game, or NPG), where LBs Perry Young (90; A) and Bryan Wright (86; A) have put up good performances despite the statistical scarring left by Ohio State's rush offense. On the other side, the Bearcat rush offense could use a good outing from RB Michael Warren, who has struggled to find running room this season (56; B-) behind an OL that has been mediocre.

I wrote about the UCF QB battle in the Week 3 Viewer's Guide. Dillon Gabriel (92; A) has solidified himself as the starter for the foreseeable future, a good statistical choice over Brandon Wimbush (43; C), who is reportedly working out at WR heading into the Cincinnati game. Sharing the backfield with Gabriel, the explosive RB tandem of Adrian Killins Jr. (98; A+) and Greg McCrae (89; A) pose a threat with every carry; the RB vs LB duel between Killins/McCrae and Young/Wright is the game within the game and should provide popcorn-worthy entertainment.

If you're staying up late, the second half of **New Mexico at San Jose State (CBSSN 10:00)** should produce some competitive football for the night owls. Whoever wins has a shot at a bowl berth; the loser is out.

Predictions
#18 UCF 31
Cincinnati 33

New Mexico 30
San Jose State 35

Saturday, October 5

Let us do or die! wrote Robert Burns in the 1793 poem *Scots Wha Hae*, which gave birth to the famous phrase, and it's apropos for the Michigan Wolverines, who entered the season as a CFP favorite but have limped around and gotten beaten up since. ★ ★ **#14 Iowa at #19 Michigan (FOX 12:00)** is a final battleground for Wolverine respectability; a loss here could do permanent damage to the Harbaugh regime. The seat has been at least lukewarm under Harbaugh for a while, given Michigan's inability to surmount the proverbial hump against top-quality competition. Michigan's best result of the year, 52-0 over hapless Rutgers (who since fired HC Chris Ash) in Week 5, is small solace in closing a September of disappointment.

Iowa keeps doing everything by the Hawkeye book, winning games without much fanfare, and quietly creeping up the rankings in the process. Venerable HC Kirk Ferentz has guided a program through a period of remarkable consistency, dating back to 2008 (power rating = +18 NPG versus an average FBS team) through 2018 (power rating = +22). Over that baker's decade, not once did the Hawks have a negative power rating season, and only twice were they below +9.

Perhaps the most significant measure of the Kirk Ferentz tenure is given in my preseason *College Football Atlas 2019* preview, which displays each HC's coaching network--all the coaches that a particular head coach has worked with since 2005. Although he's the longest tenured FBS coach in America, he has one of the shortest coaching network lists, a testament to the stability of the Iowa football program, which implicitly trusts itself and its people, giving them time to implement their vision in a way that other institutions would be wise to emulate.

In 2019, Iowa has been good across the board but hasn't been challenged outside a trip to Ames. QB Nate Stanley (86; A) has been quietly efficient, and the Hawk OL, long a staple of the Ferentz program, has been outstanding (90; A), which could pose a problem for a surprisingly soft Wolverine rush defense (-4.4 NPG).

Speaking of do or die, another Iowa team has everything on the line (★ **TCU at Iowa State, ESPN2 12:00)** in a must-win game to stay alive in the Big XII Championship race. After coming up short at Baylor, the Cyclones--a preseason darling in both the Big XII race and the national polls--are at risk of plummeting into the depths of the conference standings. TCU, as usual under HC Gary Patterson, brings a strong defense up north. LB Garret Wallow (89; A) has been an elite run defender, while S Trevon Moehrig (80; A-) and CB Jeff Gladney (77; A-) patrol a first-rate secondary. A Cyclone loss to the visiting Horned Frogs drops ISU's expected record to a home-for-the-holidays 5-7.

During commercial breaks, **#21 Oklahoma State at Texas Tech (FS1 12:00)** and **Tulane at Army (CBSSN 12:00)** offer some compelling viewing options. Without QB Alan Bowman available, the hometown Red Raiders see their upset probability shrink. Meanwhile, an intriguing nonconference contest pitting two prolific rushing offenses should be exciting for those who love the run game.

Predictions
#14 Iowa 22
#19 Michigan 32

TCU 20
Iowa State 21

#21 Oklahoma State 38
Texas Tech 28

Tulane 19
Army 27

The game of the day, ★★★ **#7 Auburn at #10 Florida (CBS 3:30)**, features a pair of lurking SEC teams in prime position to have one-off opportunities against divisional favorites Alabama (SEC West) and Georgia (SEC East). The SEC East is down to a two-team race, while the West is still mired in a three-team swamp that also includes LSU. Adding to the intrigue is the possibility that the SEC West gets two teams in the College Football Playoff, which presumes a loss by Georgia/Florida in the conference championship game. Of all the P5 divisions, the SEC West is the most likely to notch a pair of teams in the CFP, followed by the Big Ten East.

Ironically, Florida's season turned on an injury to starting QB Feleipe Franks (59; B-) when they were on the ropes against Kentucky. In came Kyle Trask, who resuscitated a comatose Gator offense in a

comeback win versus Kentucky and has thrived (88; A) since assuming the QB1 job. Trask is a distributor of the football and will not tuck it often, but he is capable of scrambling for a first down or two as necessary.

Auburn is a Top 4 team according to my in-season power rankings. Freshman QB Bo Nix (78; A-) is getting comfortable as the headline name of the Tigers. Offensively, however, a potential weakness is the lack of significant playmakers. Currently, Nix is graded higher than all his primary RBs and WRs. Against Florida's lockdown defense (+10.4 NPG), led by star senior LB Jonathan Greenard (95; A+) that could be a problem.

Keep an eye on a pair of Big XII games: ★ **#11 Texas at West Virginia (ABC 3:30)** and ★ **Baylor at Kansas State (ESPN2 3:30)**. Texas and Baylor are the two teams in best position to earn a spot against Oklahoma in the Big XII Championship game. The parity of the Big XII, however, promises to upend early prognostications and assumptions several times over, and games like these against teams expected to be in the bottom tier can derail a contender's hopes. Kansas State, especially, is a quality team that was ranked in the AP Poll a week ago before dropping one to Oklahoma State. For the Longhorns, it's strength versus strength: the Ehlinger-led passing offense of Texas (+15.3 NPG) versus the stingy coverage unit of the Mountaineers (+4.4 NPG).

Also, in the scrum of conference games, don't forget about ★ **Air Force at Navy (CBSSN 3:30)**: the first battle of the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy war that represents college football at its purest. No national rankings or playoffs or conference championships are on the line here...instead the annual service academy battle royale is for something arguably bigger.

But it's not just about firing a flare of respect for the servicemen--this promises to be a highly competitive, four-quarter game. Both teams are off to solid starts, with one competitive loss each: Air Force had the chance to upset Boise State if not for the injury to QB Donald Hammond, and Navy held their own deep into the game against American West favorite Memphis. If Hammond plays, viewers will be treated to a fantastic matchup between two of the best running QBs in the country: Hammond and Navy's Malcolm Perry.

Predictions
#7 Auburn 29
#10 Florida 26

#11 Texas 38
West Virginia 27

Baylor 29
Kansas State 26

Air Force 36
Navy 32

While waiting for better games to get underway, sneak a last peek at one of the CFP favorites **(#3 Georgia at Tennessee, ESPN 7:00)** on the road after their resume-building win versus the Fighting Irish in Week 5. By "last" I mean you might not see them again until the Cocktail Party on November 2nd-- between now and then, the schedule poses no threats to the Dogs.

A half hour later, the last of Week 6's biggest games kicks off: ★★★ **#25 Michigan State at #4 Ohio State (ABC 7:30)**, an East collision that could ripple beyond the Big Ten. Everyone is singing the praises of Ryan Day's Buckeyes, as well they should (and I did so myself in the Intro). The Week 5 gutting of Nebraska left no doubt that Ohio State is a principal player in the playoff race. Justin Fields (98; A+) has been one of the best QBs in the country, falling just slightly behind the perfection of peers like Alabama QB Tua Tagovailoa (100; A+) and Oklahoma QB Jalen Hurts (100; A+). Every Ohio State offensive position group (QB, RB, WR, TE, OL) is above the 90th percentile nationally.

The hope for Michigan State, on the road, is for their defense to stymie the Buckeye offense in ways that Ohio State hasn't encountered thus far. Certainly the Spartans, with their defensive pedigree and loaded front seven, will make life much more uncomfortable for the Ohio State OL and for Justin Fields.

The natural question is how will Michigan State score? And there's no good answer to it. Lewerke to Stewart Jr. is the best connection the Spartans have, but there may not be enough playmakers to put a true scare into the Buckeye defense.

Overlapping the Big Ten battle, ★ **California at #13 Oregon (FOX 8:00)** is a dangerous game for the current Pac-12 North favorite. The role of favorite is ever fleeting in the Pac-12--just last week Cal was ranked before losing to Arizona State--and hanging onto it is difficult; that said, Oregon may be equipped to handle the pressure.

Elsewhere, ★ **Pittsburgh at Duke (ACCN 8:00)** is an important positioning game in the ACC Coastal. While Virginia has the lead in the division, Duke has a chance, with a win over Pitt, to track them down and become a surprise co-leader of the Coastal.

Predictions
#3 Georgia 35
Tennessee 21

#25 Michigan State 20
#4 Ohio State 29

California 17
#13 Oregon 29

Pittsburgh 25
Duke 23

The climactic game of Week 6, ★★ **#15 Washington at Stanford (ESPN 10:30)**, is a tale of two seasons, one on solid foundation for 2019 with a 4-1 record, the other fading fast at 2-3 after barely holding on in Corvallis against Oregon State in Week 5.

Washington is still a playoff contender despite its Week 2 slip against Cal in a bizarre all-nighter, interrupted by weather delays. Transfer QB Jacob Eason, formerly of Georgia, has been a good distributor (80th percentile passing), though his lack of athleticism is a liability in the run game (8th percentile). He needs time to go through his progressions, which is a good sign for the Husky offense as Stanford's front has been poor rushing the passer (26th percentile). His best target is TE Hunter Bryant

(87; A). Tailbacks Salvon Ahmed (86; A) and Richard Newton (59; B-) are runners, first and foremost, as they only combine for a 2% impact rating in the passing game.

The Cardinal enter the game with continuing uncertainty at quarterback. Regardless of who starts--Davis Mills or K.J. Costello--neither has been particularly effective in 2019 (combined 8th percentile QB play this season), though Costello has a history of success (A- grade in 2018).

All signs point to a Washington win, but an underachiever at home in the first half of the season still has chance to break out of its funk and reclaim some measure of respectability in 2019. I like Washington to prevail in a close, low-scoring game.

Prediction
#15 Washington 24
Stanford 18