College Football Viewer's Guide: Week 7
A statistical overview of the week in college football

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Week 6 may not have been an earthquake, but it still represented a shakeup of the rankings about midway through the year, as 46% of the 2019 regular season is now in the books.

Florida emerged unblemished and dealt Auburn a crippling blow in its quest for the College Football Playoff. Auburn's pathway to the CFP was likeliest as a non-champion, second team from the SEC West, and such a road virtually required a win against the Gators, considering the gauntlet of LSU, Georgia, and Alabama still to come.

In Ann Arbor, Iowa failed to execute their formula for success, stalling in Michigan territory time and again and giving away the ball in the red zone, in a punchless 10-3 defeat. The Wolverines breathe new life with the critical home victory over an undefeated, ranked opponent and should bring a healthy 5-1 record--after an expected win this Saturday versus Illinois--into Penn State next week (Oct. 19) in a must-win game to keep within baton distance of the runaway Buckeyes.

Speaking of Ohio State, they continue to perform on the field as the #1 team in the nation, after yet another convincing win over solid competition. Michigan State simply asked too much of its defense--which held up admirably after some early turnovers--to hang around deep into the game against this explosive, complete Buckeye team.

In other New Year's Six news, Cincinnati--behind an unyielding, inspired second-half defense--secured the biggest Group of Five win of the season by stifling the fast-paced firepower of UCF, and Stanford upended Washington (while Oregon survived a gritty defensive grind versus Cal) to reduce the number of Pac-12 CFP contenders to two: #13 Oregon and #15 Utah, who would only face each other in the conference championship game.

> 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 7 ratchets up the intensity level another notch, featuring massive games from noon to night on Saturday. The five ★★★ games, (somewhat subjectively) indicating games with serious New Year's Six repercussions, on the docket are the most so far in 2019.

Wednesday, October 9

Wednesday night games are finally back as ★ **App State visits Louisiana (ESPN2 8:00)** in what may be a preview of the Sun Belt Championship game. While not only expected to be competitive, this game features a pair of high-quality offenses; both lean on the run game but are balanced enough to keep defenses guessing--App State has a +11.9/+8.6 net points per game (NPG) split offensively; Louisiana is a bit more run-dependent at +17.3/+6.3 NPG. Headlining these run games are two A+ RBs in the top 20 nationally in offensive percentile (a composite of efficiency and overall impact): App State's Darrynton Evans (96) and Louisiana's Trey Ragas (99).

As both Sun Belt squads have struggled in rush defense (App State -3.1 NPG; Louisiana -7.4 NPG), expect both teams to run wild in a track meet.

Prediction
App State 40
Louisiana 36

Thursday, October 10

Continue easing your way into the titanic matchups Saturday promises with two staggered Thursday night kickoffs: **Syracuse at NC State (ESPN 8:00)** as your primary game and **ULM at Texas State (ESPNU 9:15)** to finish off the night and otherwise keep you going through commercial breaks.

It almost seems forgotten now, but Syracuse was a highly regarded team early in the season, ranked in the AP Poll, until they got thrashed by the bipolar Maryland Terrapins in a result that will probably never make much sense. The 3-2 Orange's other loss was an expected defeat to Clemson, which was always baked into the projections, so despite being blown out to sea early on, Syracuse really isn't far away from reestablishing themselves as one of the ACC Atlantic's better teams. With NC State coming off a defeat to Florida State in Week 5--who was led by Wisconsin transfer QB Alex Hornibrook--there is upward mobility for the Orange if they can secure the road win.

While Wake Forest is the only Atlantic team positioned to challenge Clemson for the divisional title, bowl game slots and winning seasons are still important for program health, and this game becomes important in that vein. Whichever team drops to 3-3 faces lengthening postseason odds (Syracuse 59%; NC State 41%), with all its critical extra practice time and program exposure.

As for the Sun Belt game, while neither team is expected to challenge frontrunners Louisiana and Arkansas State in the SBC West, it should at least be a close contest. ULM has some good offensive players to provide late entertainment in QB Caleb Evans (81; A-), RB Josh Johnson (85; A), and TE Josh Pederson (90; A). Texas State is a bit stronger defensively, while their offense has labored (-7.4 NPG). The most exciting Bobcat? How about punt returner Hutch White, who rates in the 92nd percentile (+1.2 NPG) and could break a big one or two to boost the field position of a struggling offense.

Predictions
Syracuse 27
NC State 28

ULM 26
Texas State 25

Friday, October 11

Steam picks up Friday night as two divisional frontrunners take the turf: ★★ **#20 Virginia at Miami FL (ESPN 8:00)** and **Colorado at #13 Oregon (FS1 10:00)**.

The Cavaliers have risen above the fray in the always contentious ACC Coastal so far, but cracks have shown, especially in an unconvincing home win against Old Dominion that saw Virginia trailing at halftime. While the subsequent loss in South Bend is certainly forgivable, HC Bronco Mendenhall and his squad could use some of their early-season momentum to maintain their perch atop the division.

Miami nearly pulled off a comeback for the ages in Week 6 against Virginia Tech but couldn't finish the job, leaving the Hurricanes in an 0-2 hole in the Coastal, a shocking position for the preseason consensus favorite to face off against Clemson in the ACC Championship game. Everything is on the line for the Canes, who should fare better this week by virtue of simply taking better care of the football.

While I expect this game to veer toward a defensive struggle, a question looming over Miami is the QB situation. Statistically, I lean toward N'Kosi Perry (77; A-) over Jarren Williams (58; B-) as the better choice. A Miami win would thoroughly muddy the Coastal waters and bring everyone not named Georgia Tech into the race.

As mentioned in the Intro, Oregon is one of two Pac-12 teams still alive in the hunt for the Playoff. The game against Cal was an important survival test and showed Oregon can win a throttled-down defensive tilt. Colorado will bring a completely different feel and more aerial prowess--but not much defense--to Eugene, and I expect the Ducks to outpace the Buffaloes in a higher-scoring affair without much trouble.

Predictions
#20 Virginia 21
Miami FL 22

Colorado 21
#13 Oregon 37

Saturday, October 11

The Red River Rivalry (★★★ **#6 Oklahoma vs #11 Texas, FOX 12:00)** from the Cotton Bowl in Dallas is one of college football's classic games, and the matchup this year has the potential to rank among the best in recent years.

The Oklahoma offense hit the quarterback reset button for the third consecutive season and has yet to pay a material price on the field, remarkable considering the past two QBs (Baker Mayfield; Kyler Murray) were deserving Heisman winners. Jalen Hurts (100; A+) is continuing the tradition of QB excellence under HC Lincoln Riley. Currently the #1 statistical player in the nation according to my

unadjusted efficiency/impact metric, Hurts is all but guaranteed to earn an invitation to the Heisman ceremony in December.

Of course, Oklahoma's offensive riches spread well beyond Hurts. Their +38.4 offensive net points per game are the best in the nation, split productively between rush offense (+14.4) and pass offense (+24.0). If the Sooners have some weaknesses, they are evidenced in non-offensive categories--defense, specials teams, penalties--which sum to a vulnerable -4.0 NPG.

This gives Texas hope, who has plenty of firepower of their own behind elite QB Sam Ehlinger (93; A+) and star WR Devin Duvernay (93; A+). The Longhorns, though not as glitzy as the Sooners, have a similar relative balance of rush/pass offense: +7.6 rush NPG; +12.2 pass NPG. However, their softness in the secondary is cause for major alarm against the potency of Hurts and WRs CeeDee Lamb (94; A+) and Charleston Rambo (94; A+).

Expect big plays and high point totals as both QBs let loose against overwhelmed coverage units. And count the Red River victor as a virtual lock to reach the Big XII Championship game--quite possibly for a rematch of this contest.

During breaks in the fireworks celebration, check out ★ **#23 Memphis at Temple (ESPN2 12:00)**. The matchup to watch is the high-powered Tiger offense (+12.6 NPG) versus the stingy Owl defense (+17.0 NPG). Something's gotta give.

Predictions
#6 Oklahoma 47
#11 Texas 38

#23 Memphis 36
Temple 26

In the afternoon slot, Mike Dantonio's Spartans get a shot at redemption **(★★★ Michigan State at #8 Wisconsin, BTN 3:30)** against another Top 10 opponent after failing to muster a four-quarter fight against the Buckeyes in Week 6. This time, the opposing star is RB Jonathan Taylor (100; A+), the #3 rated statistical player in all of college football behind QBs Jalen Hurts and Alabama's Tua Tagovailoa.

MSU's defense took a statistical hit last Saturday night but was victimized by its own offense's inability to consistently move the football; they remain one of the top units in the conference and, probably, the nation. While the Wisconsin offense is stacked across the board, including a 95th percentile OL to lead the way for Taylor, they lack athleticism at quarterback. Jack Coan (80; A-) is passing at a much higher level in 2019, but he only has a 4% rush offense impact rating (Ohio State QB Justin Fields, for comparison, is 16%), which means the Spartan defense can key in on a more traditional two-dimensional offense. Granted, that two-dimensional Badger offense executes as well as any team in the nation, and Taylor has truly been spectacular--and importantly, he has not been giving the ball away, which was the only weakness in his game in the past.

As always in any MSU narrative, the trouble is their offense, which must find a way to capitalize on the opportunities afforded by their elite defense.

The only ranked matchup in the timeslot pits ★★★ **#1 Alabama at #24 Texas A&M (CBS 3:30)**, although it's arguable that the 3-2 Aggies are ranked at all over other deserving teams. While they acquitted themselves fairly well in losses to quality opponents Clemson and Auburn, the knuckle-scraping victory over hopeless Arkansas should've been enough to knock them out in favor of teams with better resumes. But here they are, still garnering national respect, as the top-ranked team in the country comes to town.

While on the subject of rankings, Alabama's leapfrog over Clemson is justifiable, in my opinion. Everyone remembers Clemson's near-miss against Mack Brown's Tarheels, and to this point, Dabo Swinney's defending champions have simply not played at a #1 level. (Though as I've stated several times in this space the past two weeks, I believe Ohio State has clearly been the best team in the country midway through the season.)

As to this game, Heisman co-favorite Tua Tagovailoa, mentioned earlier, has been almost mechanical in his near perfection to this point. The Crimson Tide have yet to be meaningfully challenged, so this trip to College Station should tell an interesting tale about where Alabama deserves to be slotted relative to their CFP competitors like Ohio State, Clemson, Oklahoma, etc.

Predictions
Michigan State 21
#8 Wisconsin 22

#1 Alabama 41
Texas A&M 29

The afternoon slot promises quite a flurry of interesting activity alongside the ★★★ games:

Florida State @ #2 Clemson (ABC 3:30) is an opportunity for the Tigers to sharpen their claws against the bounceback Seminoles, who have a QB controversy on their hands after Alex Hornibrook delivered a convincing win against NC State last week.

★ **Washington State at #18 Arizona State (P12N 3:30)** is a critical positioning game in the Pac-12 North and South divisions, respectively, and a chance for Mike Leach's Cougars to regroup defensively following the resignation of DC Tracy Claeys.

And two Big XII games--★ **Texas Tech at #22 Baylor (FS1 4:00)** and **Iowa State at West Virginia (ESPN 4:00)**--will reshape the contours of the middle ground of the conference race. Each team has reason for optimism in the Big XII after important conference wins last week or, in West Virginia's case, an uplifting performance in defeat to Texas.

Predictions
Florida State 13
#2 Clemson 40

Washington State 33
#18 Arizona State 34

Texas Tech 29
#22 Baylor 36

Iowa State 32
West Virginia 22

Primetime kicks off with a bang, as ★★★ **#10 Penn State travels to #7 Iowa (ABC 7:30)** in a critical opportunity for both Big Ten Championship contenders. Undefeated Penn State has made short work of bottom-tier Big Ten teams Maryland and Purdue in the past two weeks but now sees the competition level crank up significantly. QB Sean Clifford (94; A+) has been a revelation, currently playing at a higher level than 2018 starter Trace McSorley. RBs Noah Cain (89; A) and Journey Brown (85; A-) have both excelled, and Pat Freiermuth (95; A+) is one of the top TEs in the country.

On the other side, the PSU defense is deep and talented, notching +22.4 NPG while getting consistent contributions from all three levels. Considering Iowa's inability to reach the endzone against Michigan, there are legitimate concerns about moving the football successfully. But I do believe all the turnovers against the Wolverines were an outlier result that won't repeat themselves--QB Nate Stanley (76; B+) had taken great care of the football until that point--and the Hawkeye offense, behind its flagship offensive line, should be more efficient against the Nittany Lions.

Meanwhile, ★★ **USC at #9 Notre Dame (NBC 7:30)** may not have serious CFP implications--despite the Top 10 ranking, I don't believe the Irish have a clear path to the Playoff after losing to Georgia--but the annual cross-sectional is a game between traditional powers that has even more cachet after USC's upset of Washington two weeks ago.

Kicking off simultaneously, two unbeatens also face challenges on their own turf. ★ **Louisville at #18 Wake Forest (ACCN 7:30)** is a tricky game for the Demon Deacons, one of CFB's surprise undefeated teams near the halfway point. The Cardinals are rapidly improving under a superior coaching staff than the one that left town last year and should give Wake Forest all they can handle. And ★ **Nebraska at Minnesota (FS1 7:30)** is an opportunity for the Cornhuskers to upset their way back into the divisional race after inching past Northwestern a week ago. While each team has its weaknesses, both the Gopher WRs and the Husker DBs are top-notch--whichever unit wins that matchup may decide the outcome.

Predictions
#10 Penn State 25
#7 Iowa 20

USC 24
#9 Notre Dame 30

Louisville 32
#18 Wake Forest 37

Nebraska 31
Minnesota 36

Just a half hour later, two more kickoffs crowd the timeslot even further, including one of the games of the year thus far: ★★★ **#7 Florida at #5 LSU (ESPN 8:00)**.

Can the Gators do it again? Everything changed for Florida when an injury to starter Feleipe Franks handed Kyle Trask the reins...at the time, Kentucky was well on its way to knocking off the Gators in Week 3. Since then, Trask has outperformed Franks across the board--81 vs 63 on a [0,100] percentile scale--but with heavier pass dependence to his game. Franks was about 3.5 times as likely to make an impact in the run game, but the problem with his contribution there is that it was largely a negative one, costing his team about -1.0 NPG in his ball-carrying efforts. Statistically, Trask is considerably more efficient as a runner (though still slightly below average), but he and the offensive triumvirate of Mullen/Hevesy/Gonzales are simply more selective of when that should be deployed. The result is an improved offense that, by largely abandoning the QB run element, has honed its execution as a two-dimensional system.

As much of a surprise as Trask has been, he's far outpaced by the stunning Heisman-esque campaign of LSU QB Joe Burrow (99; A+), who has unquestionably been among the nation's best passers in 2019. LSU better utilizes the talents of its proven wideouts in its opened-up offense, specifically top targets Justin Jefferson (97; A+) and Ja'Marr Chase (94; A+). The elite play of those three accounts for 56% of a superlative +22.9 NPG passing offense. The rush offense, in contrast, is relatively tame at +4.1 NPG--neither a weakness nor an extreme danger for the Gator defense.

A statistical truth of college football is that the passing game is inherently more volatile, which increases the likelihood that a pass-dependent team experiences greater fluctuations in performance throughout the course of a 12-game season, and this should give the Gators some hope. Both teams play stout defense; by relying more on its run game, Florida should hew closer to its norm, while the 2019 incarnation of LSU--on any given Saturday--could swing up or down to a greater degree. If the Gators catch the Tigers on a downswing, then the upset is certainly in play.

#15 Utah at Oregon State (P12N 8:00) may not sound like a great matchup, given Oregon State's perennial haunting of the Pac-12 North basement, but this Beaver team is more dangerous than past iterations. They posted a strong road win over the inexplicable UCLA Bruins last week and possess serious offensive firepower, led by star WR Isaiah Hodgins (95; A+). At home, with some explosiveness to their offense, the Beavers have a puncher's chance if Utah continues to make uncharacteristic mistakes--it's almost unheard of under HC Kyle Whittingham, but the Utes have posted -8.1 NPG in combined special teams and penalties, which cannot continue if they hope to remain a factor in the CFP hunt.

Predictions
#7 Florida 27
#5 LSU 32

#15 Utah 41
Oregon State 27

The late night games promise a wide range of entertainment, from a potential shootout **(★★ Hawai'i at #14 Boise State, ESPN2 10:15)** to a cloud of dust **(Wyoming at San Diego State, CBSSN 10:30)** and maybe somewhere in between **(★ Washington at Arizona, FS1 11:00)**. Choose your pace and relax after the frenetic events of the afternoon and primetime slots, replete as they were with too many games to track. None of the above are casual fall-asleep-watching fare: both the MWC games are important for conference considerations and, of course, for Boise State's bid to represent the G5 in the New Year's Six;

and both Pac-12 teams, though neither are currently projected to win their divisions, are both alive in the high-parity conference.

Predictions
Hawai'i 27
#14 Boise State 40

Wyoming 13
San Diego State 20

Washington 30
Arizona 24