

College Football Viewer's Guide: Week 7

A statistical overview of the week in college football

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Given the glut of top matchups in Week 7, watching ranked teams getting knocked off throughout the weekend was no surprise, but the upset of the season--South Carolina toppling the #3 Georgia Bulldogs in the lunchtime slot--caught everyone by surprise. Of course, that is the nature of big upsets: in a vacuum, they are highly unlikely, but over the course of 14 weeks, randomness and the Law of Large Numbers rule the season. Inevitably, a team like South Carolina upends a favorite like Georgia. North Carolina almost did it to Clemson earlier in the year; the Gamecocks were able to finish the job. Elsewhere, #19 Wake Forest, #20 Virginia, and #23 Memphis were all knocked off by unranked opponents.

#5 LSU, unlike past iterations of the Bayou Bengals, continued to overwhelm with their offense, fending off #7 Florida by dropping 42 points on the usually reliable Gator defense. But there is a silver lining for HC Dan Mullen: despite coming up short in Death Valley, with preseason SEC East favorite Georgia's loss to an inferior South Carolina team, Florida emerges as the new favorite to represent the East in the SEC Championship game.

Should they reach Atlanta in December, their likeliest opponent is still Alabama (although a rematch with LSU is certainly a possibility). The top-ranked Crimson Tide showed a few defensive cracks vs Texas A&M but, in the end, possessed too much offensive firepower for the Aggies. QB Tua Tagovailoa has been virtually perfect in the passing game, and Alabama's expected regular season record, for the first time in 2019, has been elevated to a perfect 12-0 (63% chance).

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 third team joined the ranks of the "expected unbeaten" this week: the Oklahoma Sooners defense held up their end of the bargain, demonstrating that the 2019 Sooners are more complete than the 2018 version that reached the CFP, by making enough stops in a Red River Rivalry that saw the OU offense commit some uncharacteristic mistakes. After a failed onside attempt, the Sooners prevailed, and now they are solidly a playoff favorite alongside Alabama and Clemson. (Clemson began the season with a 12-0 expected record.)

In the Big Ten, the Penn State walled off the Hawkeyes in a defensive victory in Iowa City, keeping the Nittany Lions very much alive in the East division and playoff hunt, and Wisconsin pasted a reeling Michigan State squad and looks unconquerable in the Big Ten West--although undefeated Minnesota may yet have something to say about that after wiping out visiting Nebraska on the strength of a

punishing ground game. Ohio State, of course, remains the current Big Ten favorite, but the competition will be fierce.

Week 8, though it has a few ranked matchups of national import, hones its focus on divisional and conference races. For most major contenders, it's about surviving and moving on, but as mentioned above, the truly stunning upsets are almost always unpredictable and unexpected.

Wednesday, October 16

Another week with a Wednesday kickoff, as **South Alabama visiting Troy (ESPN2 8:00)** opens up the back half of college football's regular season (53% complete). Unfortunately for the Jaguars, their season is largely a lost cause at this juncture, as their expected record has been mired at a forgettable 2-10 since September.

That means this game is really about Troy, sitting at a disappointing 2-3 mark, righting the ship somewhat as they fully disembark into conference play. The Trojans, with an expected win, would be hovering right around that six-win threshold necessary for a bowl game and still jockeying for divisional position with other mid-table rivals like Georgia Southern and Georgia State. (Conference favorite App State may be too far ahead for any of them to track down.) If you're looking for a player to watch, WR Kaylor Geiger (89th percentile; A grade) has posted +2.7 net points / game (NPG) and has been the best offensive player for Troy in 2019.

Prediction

South Alabama 18

Troy 32

Thursday, October 17

Sun Belt action of much higher consequence kicks off Thursday night, as ★ **Louisiana at Arkansas State (ESPNU 7:30)** pits the top two contenders for the West division head to head for, essentially, a two-game lead when factoring in the tiebreaker. In other words, the Thursday night victor is the favorite to reach the Sun Belt Championship game to take on (in all likelihood) Appalachian State.

The Louisiana rush offense is exceptionally strong, posting a +13.3 NPG halfway through the season, close to national leaders Tulane (+14.5) and Ohio State (+14.4). Against a suspect Arkansas State rush defense (-7.9 NPG), this unit should fare well. Arkansas State has some offensive punch of its own (+8.1 NPG) and better special teams. This one should be close.

At halftime of the SBC game, flip over for the kickoff of **UCLA at Stanford (ESPN 9:00)**. The Cardinal have emerged from a bruising first-half schedule at 3-3 and are on pace for a record of about 6-6, the cusp of bowl eligibility. UCLA is an enigmatic flop under Chip Kelly's guidance, still groping for an identity that seems far removed from the speed-and-space halcyon days of Kelly's tenure at Oregon. Their expected record has already plummeted to an alarming 3-9; there seems no end in sight to Bruin misery.

Predictions

Louisiana 34

Arkansas State 35

UCLA 23

Stanford 28

Friday, October 18

The games are conveniently staggered Friday night, starting with ★ **Marshall at Florida Atlantic (CBSSN 6:30)**, an important game to keep pace with C-USA East leader Western Kentucky. Both teams are more offensive minded but do it in different ways: Marshall leans on its running game (+6.3 NPG) behind QB Isaiah Green, a much better ball-carrier than thrower, and RB Brenden Knox (68; B). FAU is more effective in a passing game (+6.7 NPG) that prioritizes TE Harrison Bryant (73; B+). Another player to keep an eye on is FAU freshman RB Malcolm Davidson (95; A+), who could take a huge leap with better blocking up front.

A half-hour later, **Pittsburgh at Syracuse (ESPN 7:00)** gets underway in a game that propagates the Week 8 theme of wrestling for conference position. Pitt has the advantage of playing in the ACC Coastal, a league notorious for its parity among prognosticators who struggle to accurately forecast the anyone-can-win division. The best thing to happen to Pitt during its bye week was division leader Virginia dropping a game to the Miami Hurricanes, infusing new life into the divisional championship hopes of many Coastal teams. The Panthers now have an opportunity to remain in the hunt against a reeling Syracuse team that is hurtling toward the bottom of the ACC Atlantic table after a tough 16-10 loss to NC State in Week 7.

Around halftime of the Pitt/Syracuse game, the nation's best first-half team kicks off (**#4 Ohio State at Northwestern, BTN 8:30**) in a game that might have looked good on paper in August but no longer does in October. While Pat Fitzgerald's Wildcats can play some defense and held their own against mighty Wisconsin, the offense is woeful and will not muster much of anything against the Buckeye defense. Even if Northwestern hangs around early, it's only a matter of time before Ohio State leaves them in the dust.

If you stay up for the second half of the nightcap, **UNLV at Fresno State (CBSSN 10:00)**, expect the Bulldogs to bounce back after a disappointing defensive performance against the Air Force option in Week 7.

Predictions

Marshall 22

Florida Atlantic 27

Pittsburgh 28

Syracuse 23

#4 Ohio State 34

Northwestern 13

UNLV 20
Fresno State 34

Saturday, October 19

Coming off a tough loss to LSU and eyeing a Gamecock team revived after a shock upset of playoff contender Georgia, Dan Mullen's Gators should be laser-focused on what could have otherwise been a trap game (★ ★ **#9 Florida at South Carolina, ESPN 12:00**). As mentioned in the Intro, despite their defeat to the currently #2 Tigers, Florida finds itself in the SEC East pole position--Georgia's more devastating loss cost them two games in the regular season record projection.

It's tough to imagine South Carolina, flawed as they are, notching consecutive Top 10 upsets, but the Gamecocks run the ball well (+6.9 NPG), which is a favorable matchup against the Gator front, which is solid but not unbreakable (+2.0 NPG). Considering the comparative mismatch of the South Carolina passing game versus the Gator secondary, OC Bryan McClendon would be wise to lean heavily into the ground game and bog down the game into a low-scoring affair, all the better for an underdog who can't be reasonably expected to come from too far behind.

A trio of other Top 10 teams also take the field at noon, but none seem to be in any real danger: **#6 Wisconsin at Illinois (BTN 12:00)**; **#3 Clemson at Louisville (ABC 12:00)**; and **West Virginia at #5 Oklahoma (FOX 12:00)**. If you're seeking out the big upset and tune into these mismatches, there may be at least some slivers of hope. West Virginia might be able to muster enough offense to hang around, although the Sooner defense has tightened the screws this year and has become a legitimately complementary unit. Louisville is an improved squad under the superior coaching of HC Scott Satterfield and the former App State staff. Illinois marched back last week against Michigan to make it a game and can run the ball effectively on occasion.

Predictions

#9 Florida 32

South Carolina 26

#6 Wisconsin 45

Illinois 19

#3 Clemson 48

Louisville 19

West Virginia 27

#5 Oklahoma 52

That said, I'd trust the top-ranked squads in those games to take care of business, padding their resumes for the CFP Committee's deliberations in a couple weeks. Instead, rotate in ★ **Purdue at #23 Iowa (ESPN2 12:00)**: the Boilermakers, without starting QB Elijah Sindelar or sensational sophomore WR Rondale Moore, played one of their best games of the year last week in a 40-14 thrashing of the hot-and-cold Maryland Terrapins. As Iowa recovers from the body blows dealt in back-to-back weeks by traditional Big Ten East powers Michigan and Penn State, grasping for some offensive momentum, Purdue has a chance of sneaking in and delivering the coup de grace to Iowa's once-hopeful season.

Elsewhere, one of the beneficiaries of the Longhorn loss to Oklahoma last week was the Iowa State Cyclones, who are lurking just below Baylor and Texas in the Big XII standings. ★ **Iowa State at Texas Tech (FS1 12:00)** is a crucial road game for the Cyclones to remain in the hunt for the second slot in the conference championship game against the Sooners.

Predictions

Purdue 18

#23 Iowa 29

Iowa State 30

Texas Tech 22

The Pac-12 Conference rarely gets the limelight, but that changes this week, as two of the nation's top three games hail from the west. First up is ★★ **#12 Oregon at #25 Washington (ABC 3:30)**, a matchup of the top contenders in the Pac-12 North. The Ducks are also still in the hunt for the playoff, with but one close loss away from home to Auburn to open the season. QB Justin Herbert is an accomplished passer (85; A) but has been a liability carrying the football (4; F), which could be a problem against a Washington defense that thrives in coverage and thus forces the QB to either hold the ball a long time or escape the pocket. On the other side, the story is almost exactly the same, as Husky QB Jacob Eason has a similar profile to Herbert, and the Duck defense is similarly backloaded in its strength. Both teams should aspire to establish the run game early to batter at the opposing defense's vulnerability.

As I've repeated often in past Viewer's Guides, special teams and penalties are X-factors in close games, and in this third phase, Washington has the advantage (+4.2 NPG versus -0.6 for Oregon), and combined with a home field advantage in the deafening echo chamber by the bay, I actually lean toward the lower-ranked Huskies in what should be a classic. You won't want to miss a minute of this one.

Thirty minutes later, ★★ **#18 Baylor at Oklahoma State (FOX 4:00)** offers a compelling alternative from the Big XII. A surprise unbeaten, the Baylor Bears have surged into the role of favorites to face Oklahoma in the Big XII Championship game--although in a conference with the overall parity of the Big XII, their grip on that rope is tenuous. Bear QB Charlie Brewer (80; A-) has been efficient all season and should have success against the Cowboys, but the Oklahoma State run game is dangerous enough to inflict real damage and threaten the upset. I think this is close to a coin flip and call for the homefield Cowboys to spoil Baylor's perfect season.

Predictions

#12 Oregon 27

#25 Washington 29

#18 Baylor 34

Oklahoma State 37

There are plenty of other options to fill out the rotation in the afternoon slot, starting with a couple critical G5 contests: ★ **Southern Miss at Louisiana Tech (NFLN 3:30)** and ★★ **Temple at #19 SMU (ESPN2 3:30)**. Louisiana Tech and Southern Miss are the top contenders to win the C-USA West after North Texas's early struggles, while SMU's undefeated season will be severely tested by the sterling Temple defense.

Or if you're in the mood for the usual ACC Coastal chaos, a pair of evenly matched divisional games--★ **Duke at Virginia (ACCN 3:30)** and ★ **North Carolina at Virginia Tech (ESPN Extra 3:30)**--should provide plenty of entertainment during Oregon/Washington commercial breaks.

Predictions

Southern Miss 26
Louisiana Tech 30

Temple 30
#19 SMU 33

Duke 24
Virginia 26

North Carolina 30
Virginia Tech 31

Keep an eye out for an unusual kickoff time for the other Pac-12 game of the week mentioned above: ★★ ★ **#17 Arizona State at #13 Utah (P12N 6:00)**, a major clash between arguably the top two South contenders. Under second-year HC Herm Edwards, the Sun Devil program has been rebuilt onto a surprisingly solid foundation. What looked like a strange coaching hire for the college game has worked out wonderfully, and now the Sun Devils are in prime position, sitting at 2-1 in conference play with a chance to notch a critical tiebreaker over the preseason favorite Utes.

Of course, that's easier said than done. Reliable HC Kyle Whittingham and his top-notch staff have the best team in the Pac-12 South, possibly the entire conference, and are still in the CFP chase. The profile is a bit different this year--more reliance on the pass game; poor special teams and discipline--but that probably reinforces how effective and adaptable the Utah staff is, rather than being an indictment of their coaching acumen.

The last of Week 8's big three, ★★ ★ **#16 Michigan at #7 Penn State (ABC 7:30)** kicks off in primetime. For all their struggles, despite all the digital ink spilled maligning the underperformances, Jim Harbaugh's Michigan Wolverines are solidly positioned with a 5-1 (3-1) record and could move into the prime challenger's seat with an upset road win over the undefeated Nittany Lions.

Penn State, however, is exceptionally balanced, as evidenced by their primary splits in NPG:

- Rush Offense: +7.6
- Pass Offense: +10.1
- Rush Defense: +9.1
- Pass Defense: +10.2

Their only liability has been special teams and penalties (-3.1 NPG), which is the only net point edge Michigan (+2.6) can claim heading into this game. Given Michigan's inconsistencies in rush offense and rush defense, which leads to reliance on the volatility of the passing game on both sides of the ball, they will likely need to land a haymaker in special teams--both Donovan Peoples-Jones and Ronnie Bell are capable in this phase, assuming they hang onto the ball--and erode Penn State's advantage by committing fewer significant penalties throughout the game.

Predictions

#17 Arizona State 19

#13 Utah 31

#16 Michigan 25

#7 Penn State 30

After the conclusion of Michigan/PSU, check out the second half of another important Pac-12 game, ★ **Arizona at USC (P12N 9:30)**, of meaningful consequence: whoever wins will join the ASU/Utah victor as co-#1 in the South division.

★ **#14 Boise State at BYU (ESPN2 10:15)** is almost impossible to predict, given BYU's up-and-down play and QB woes, but this is the type of game--after losing to lesser teams and being written off completely--that the hometown Cougars surprise everyone and compete much better than expected.

And even later, for the true night owls, ★ **Air Force at Hawai'i (CBSSN 11:00)** is a fascinating clash of styles that should provide a compelling four-quarter battle in Honolulu.

Predictions

Arizona 25

USC 36

#14 Boise State 32

BYU 27

Air Force 35

Hawai'i 33