College Football Viewer's Guide: Week 9
A statistical overview of the week in college football

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It took but a single week for the upset-of-the-year torch to be passed, as the 30-plus point underdog Fighting Illini's shocker over the previously invincible Wisconsin Badgers rippled throughout the college football world and forward in time to the upcoming College Football Playoff Committee's initial 2019 deliberations. Illinois contained Jonathan Taylor enough, limiting gash plays, to force Badger QB Jack Coan to make plays to win--a well-known defensive script, but not yet achieved this season. Curiously, on a late-game 3rd-and-short play at midfield, when a single first down would've largely locked down the win, Wisconsin kept Taylor off the field, alerting everyone watching to a pass, which Illinois coolly picked off to set up James McCourt's seismic field goal.

Florida survived a scare against South Carolina, aided by a bit of questionable refereeing on a Gamecock endzone interception, and tacked on same late points to overshadow how dicey the situation was for the Gators much of the game. But a win is a win, as both Florida and Georgia held serve (the Bulldogs leaped to life after an anemic scoreless half versus Kentucky) in the SEC East, setting up the divisional game of the year: the Cocktail Party on November 2nd (Week 10), with an SEC Championship berth as the table stakes.

Oregon and Washington delivered about all you could ask for from what I tabbed as a must-watch ★★★ game. Early momentum favored the Huskies, as they marched out to a strong first-half lead and looked poised to grab hold of the game. But it was QB Justin Herbert and the Oregon Ducks who finished strong, not only stealing away a critical conference road game but effectively claiming the Pac-12 North crown in the effort. In projected conference record, Oregon now boasts an insurmountable four-game lead over the congestion of teams like Washington, Washington State, and Stanford. We haven't yet reached November, but Oregon has punched their ticket to the Pac-12 Conference Championship game; the only question is if they win their way into the playoff.

In the Pac-12 South, Utah professionally dispatched the upstart Arizona State Wildcats, likely reducing it to a two-team race between the Utes and USC Trojans. Notably, USC holds the all-important tiebreaker over Utah.

While Wisconsin/Illinois was the game of the day (and undoubtedly one of the games of the year), Michigan/PSU was the game of the night in the eerie whiteout that creates one of CFB's best evening

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

backdrops. The Wolverines could have succumbed to the 21-0 hole they found themselves in and given into the 2019 narrative of underperforming nearly every stop along the way; instead, they rallied, played lock-down defense (until one lightning strike from PSU QB Sean Clifford), and clawed all the way back to a 4th-and-game pass from Shea Patterson that hit WR Ronnie Bell in the numbers but dropped to the turf. Penn State held on in a classic.

Thursday, October 24

It may seem an unlikely story, but an upset alert of one of college football's few remaining unbeatens is flashing in the week's opener, ★ ★ **#16 SMU at Houston (ESPN 7:30)**. Given SMU's dream season and the forgettable melodrama of Houston stars, such as QB D'Eriq King, sitting out the remainder of exploitative "redshirt" seasons, the chalk should strongly favor the Mustangs. Transfer QB Shane Buechele (82nd percentile in offensive efficiency; A- grade) has revived his college career, leading SMU to the #15 schedule-adjusted scoring offense nationally past the midway point of the season. Furthering the argument for the Mustangs is that their offense is diverse, marking positive net points per game (NPG) in both the run game (+4.6) and pass game (+10.9) without relying too heavily on any of their playmakers. Instead, they spread the ball around to a bevy of talented skill players, from WRs Reggie Roberson, Jr. (81; A-) and James Proche (84; A-) to RBs Xavier Jones (79; A-) and TJ McDaniel (63; B). Buechele himself can carry the football as needed, too, leaving the Mustangs replete with a dangerous arsenal.

Houston, despite losing its heralded QB, recovered to soundly beat a preseason C-USA favorite North Texas team as underdogs before acquitting themselves fairly well in a two-TD loss to current American favorite Cincinnati. Though last week's near-miss against UCONN is a troubling indicator, QB Clayton Tune hasn't been far behind King in overall performance metrics, and Houston's rush attack is still formidable (+9.6 NPG) that matches up well against SMU's defensive vulnerability (-0.7 NPG). The Cougars are diverse in their skill talent, as well; watch out for explosive plays not only from the backs but from the receivers in the run game.

While defense has been an issue for Houston, I expect the hometown squad to produce plenty of points in what should be a prolific Week 9 opener. Factoring in some 2019 regression-to-the-mean effects (SMU overachieving; Houston underachieving), I'll go out on a limb here and call for a big upset straight out of the gates.

Prediction
#16 SMU 38
Houston 41

Friday, October 26

Like Thursday night, Friday night features only one FBS game: **USC at Colorado (ESPN2 9:00)**. While the Buffaloes have faded from contention with a projected 2-7 conference record, the Trojans are still in the thick of the Pac-12 South race, even with favorite Utah at 3-1 with a crucial head-to-head win tiebreaker in their back pocket.

Colorado's offense has been slipping, particularly in the passing game, as the year has progressed; meanwhile, the defense is porous, especially in coverage (-11.8 NPG). Unless they display more of the explosive aerial attack expected of the Buffs in the preseason, the chance of an upset seems remote. The Trojans should notch a relatively easy victory with the presumptive North champion Oregon Ducks on deck in Week 10.

Prediction
USC 35
Colorado 23

Saturday, October 27

It was supposed to be one of the marquee games of the year, a clash of potentially the two best teams in the nation when only results (and not preseason expectations) were considered. Instead, Illinois did the unthinkable, knocking off the Badgers in the upset of the year in Week 8. All that said, ★★★ **#13 Wisconsin at #3 Ohio State (FOX 12:00)** still promises much of what it did before the Illini stunner: a Big Ten battle of great defenses and offenses executing at an exceptional level for most of the 2019 campaign. Additionally, College Football Playoff berths are still in play, even for the Badgers. As ugly as a loss to a downtrodden program like Illinois may be on the resume, a turnaround win over the best team in America erases some of the blemish, and winning out in the Big Ten would be enough to remain heavily involved in the conversation.

But that, of course, is easier said than done, and a reason Wisconsin's expected record dropped from 11-1 (had they beaten Illinois) to 9-3 (after the loss) is because of the depth and quality of the conference. A team that loses to Illinois wouldn't seem to have much hope against the Buckeyes, and there are still teams like Iowa and undefeated Minnesota to contend with in November.

The reason for optimism? Consider the offenses that Ohio State has faced in 2019, based on SOS-adjusted scoring:

- #82 Florida Atlantic (W)
- #53 Cincinnati (W)
- #35 Indiana (W)
- #94 Miami OH (W)
- #86 Nebraska (W)
- #39 Michigan State (W)
- #112 Northwestern (W)
- #6 Wisconsin (?)

Stated another way: Michigan State is by far one of the two best offenses that the Buckeyes have faced all season, and they don't exactly scare most self-respecting defenses. Wisconsin is another animal entirely and will challenge Ohio State in a way none of those teams could. The balance works against the Buckeyes, as well, as they have thrived in pass defense (+15.9 NPG) but, while good, have been less dominant in the run game (+4.5 NPG) where Wisconsin excels.

The Ohio State offense is currently the best in the country, so the Badgers will need to be at their defensive best to keep within a single touchdown, but this game may still match its pre-Week 8 hype.

Elsewhere in the Big Ten, ★ **#20 Iowa at Northwestern (ESPN2 12:00)** sets up an old-school defensive brawl between two teams that have been either inconsistent (Iowa, #50) or woeful (Northwestern, #112) in SOS-adjusted scoring offense. In the ACC, ★ **Miami at Pittsburgh (ESPN 12:00)** is a must-win game for the Panthers to keep pace in the ACC Coastal race, while the Hurricanes--the preseason favorite--has been reduced to the role of spoiler (5-7 expected record) for the remainder of 2019.

And I'd be remiss not to mention the spectacular descent of the Rutgers football program. They've dismissed their coach and seen starters declare redshirts, including QB Artur Sitkowski. In something of a tragic comedy, **Liberty visits Rutgers (BTN 12:00)** as full touchdown favorites over the Scarlet Knights. If Rutgers is going to win a second game this year, this is their chance.

Predictions
#13 Wisconsin 24
#3 Ohio State 34

#20 Iowa 21
Northwestern 12

Miami 17
Pittsburgh 23

Liberty 23
Rutgers 22

The crowded slate of an otherwise manageably light weekend in college football lands Saturday afternoon, headlined by the second of three ranked matchups: ★ ★ ★ **#9 Auburn at #2 LSU (CBS 3:30)**, two of the three SEC West teams still alive in the playoff hunt, along with the perennial final-four Crimson Tide.

Freshly invigorated by a surprise #4 offense--trailing only Ohio State, Alabama, and Oklahoma--and led by a new Heisman frontrunner in QB Joe Burrow, the LSU Tigers are among the surprises of the college football season due to their unanticipated productivity. There is plenty of offensive talent at Burrow's disposal: The receiving tandem of Justin Jefferson (98; A+) and Ja'Marr Chase (92; A) is one of the best in the nation; Clyde Edwards-Helaire is a workhorse running back (27% rush offense impact); and TE Thaddeus Moss is a solid third option in the passing game. Worth nearly 21 net points per game, the LSU passing offense is one of the most polished in the nation.

For Auburn, freshman QB Bo Nix (52; C+) continues to perform at an average level statistically, and he doesn't have an LSU-level of skill talent to support him. However, the Auburn defense is currently #4 in the nation (equal to the LSU offensive rank), which should make for a compelling matchup between two of the nation's elite units in a game with major postseason ramifications.

Meanwhile, a trio of ranked teams face challenges from unranked foes.

In perhaps the most important of the three, ★★ **#6 Penn State travels to Michigan State (ABC 3:30)** after surviving the final play in Happy Valley last week. While the Spartan season has been somewhat underwhelming, they rank surprisingly high in both scoring defense (#12) and scoring offense (#39) for a team that has had a somewhat disappointing season. On the road, that's dangerous turf for the Nittany Lions to tread, especially after grinding out two exhausting wins against traditional Big Ten powers Iowa and Michigan.

In the Big XII, two important games kick off simultaneously: ★ **#15 Texas at TCU (FOX 3:30)** and ★ **Oklahoma State at #23 Iowa State (FS1 3:30)**. The parallel thread of ranked teams in danger against underachieving but capable opponents runs through these matchups, as both TCU and Oklahoma State expected to compete for the right to face Oklahoma in the conference championship game. If either team wants to jump back into the race, the time is now--one more loss certainly eliminates them from contention.

Between the two ranked Big XII outfits, I trust the Cyclones more, as they currently boast the #5 scoring offense in the land, a truly stunning ranking (one slot ahead of Wisconsin) for a team rebuilt on defense under the leadership of HC Matt Campbell and DC Jon Heacock. In fact, in my own preseason preview, I severely underestimated the Cyclone offense, rating them at a mediocre #65 nationally.

Texas, on the other hand, needed a final drive to best Kansas. While Les Miles is doing a fine job reinventing the Jayhawks, it was still an unnerving signal for the Longhorn hopes of a rematch against Oklahoma in December. If Kansas can nearly topple Texas, then HC Tom Herman can't take any game for granted.

Predictions
#9 Auburn 27
#2 LSU 31

#6 Penn State 22
Michigan State 19

#15 Texas 29
TCU 28

Oklahoma State 27
#23 Iowa State 37

In primetime, ★★ **#8 Notre Dame at #19 Michigan (ABC 7:30)** is the last of the weekend's three ranked matchups and, of course, a must-win game for the Fighting Irish to remain an outside threat in the playoff hunt. Realistically, the Irish path is a slim one, and without a conference championship game or a signature win available--none of Michigan, Stanford, or USC have put together the seasons Notre Dame needed from them, especially after losing to Georgia--it would take a chaotic implosion of several P5 conferences for the Irish to be in the mix. Instead, their best finish is likely a non-playoff bowl in the New Year's Six, which probably requires a win over the Wolverines.

Michigan, as discussed in the Intro, made an admirable comeback but fell short at Penn State, and both the football and the Wolverines' Big Ten East hopes slipped from their hands on that fateful final pass.

Out west, ★ **#24 Arizona State at UCLA (P12N 7:30)** represents an opportunity for both teams to hang around in the Pac-12 South race, should leaders Utah and USC unexpectedly stumble. The Sun Devils are much better positioned, but the Bruins have played better football since their disastrous 0-3 nonconference display and are now able to play the spoiler role, if not realistically contend in the division. To remain in the hunt, Arizona State needs Utah to drop two games along the way, since the Utes hold the tiebreaker--one loss could come in a trip to Washington next week. USC, on the other hand, visits Tempe in Week 11.

Speaking of Utah, they take the field in a "Pac-12 After Dark" kickoff **(California at #12 Utah, FS1 10:00)**. After Week 4, this game might have looked better, back when Cal was 4-0 and one of September's surprise storylines. But while the defense has continued to play very good football (#10 scoring defense), the offense has slumped during a three-game losing skid. Against Utah's #6 defense, that's a bad formula--Cal will be fortunate to hit double digits on the road and shouldn't meaningfully threaten the Utes.

★ **Washington State at #11 Oregon (ESPN 10:30)** very well could double the point total of Cal/Utah. That's no disparagement of the high-quality Duck defense, but HC/OC Mike Leach's Cougars are always a threat to put up offensive numbers, while Oregon, led by efficient passing QB Justin Herbert (71; B+) and a top-notch offensive line equally adept at run blocking and pass protection, will be hard for Washington State's #78 defense to stop.

While it may be easy to overlook an MWC kickoff late at night while two Pac-12 games are in action, try to work ★ **Utah State at Air Force (ESPN2 10:15)** into your rotation. While Boise State's Week 8 defeat to BYU didn't hurt their conference standings, it did diminish the Broncos' aura and shone a ray of hope for the other two contenders in the MWC Mountain division. Besides the divisional race aspect, and maybe more important for bleary-eyed but committed college football fans, both Utah State and Air Force are very good football teams and should produce a highly entertaining football game in and of itself.