

College Football Viewer's Guide: Week 13

A statistical overview of the week in college football

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Cinderella teams Minnesota and Baylor finally broke their glass slippers on Saturday, in opposite fashion. Iowa raced out to a commanding early lead against the Gophers, who then grinded back into the game in fits and starts in the second half, before consecutive sacks to start their final drive knocked out star QB Tanner Morgan--who is now in concussion protocol--and obliterated their chances of remaining unbeaten. Conversely, Baylor shredded Oklahoma for a half, achieving the previously unthinkable feat of making Sooner QB Jalen Hurts appear mediocre and unable to cope with pressure, kneecapping his Heisman campaign. That, of course, did not last, as the masterminds of the Sooner offensive machine--Lincoln Riley, Cale Gundy, Bill Bedenbaugh--rebooted in the second half to devastating effect, surging back into the game as the defense bowed up, and in the end the comeback story may have actually helped Hurts' awards candidacy more than an easier victory.

Significantly, about a half hour before OU/Baylor teed it up, the Iowa State Cyclones connected on a game-winning field goal in Ames, lashing the Texas Longhorns for their third conference loss of the season. Which means that the OU/Baylor rematch is virtually guaranteed in the Big XII Championship game. While a current glance at the College Football Playoff rankings would seem to indicate the Big XII will be on the outside looking in, several weeks of major games can shift the landscape. Both the Sooners and Bears could finish at 11-1, meaning a 12-1 conference champion would have a pretty strong argument for inclusion over, say, a second (or third...) SEC team.

Related to the SEC and the playoff, of course, is the major news of the week, a sad and devastating hip injury to Alabama QB Tua Tagovailoa. Whatever you think of the Crimson Tide and their backdoor shot at the CFP as a second-place division finisher, you have to feel for Tua and hope he is able to make a full recovery. As for the playoff itself, without Tua, Alabama cannot truly be considered one of the "four best teams," however nebulous that criterion may be. The SEC's dubious scheduling mechanism of mid-November FCS opponents now backfires on the Tide, as backup Mac Jones cannot prove anything against Samford, no matter how many touchdowns they tack onto the scoreboard.

This week, I'm skipping past the weeknight games--a set comprising the MAC and a couple lower-tier conference games between non-contenders in the MWC and ACC--and jumping straight into the consequential thicket of the penultimate regular-season Saturday.

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.

Saturday, November 23

The Big Ten East is on the line at lunchtime as **★★★ #8 Penn State at #2 Ohio State (FOX 12:00)** kicks off the day in grand fashion at The Horseshoe. It's a testament to how good the Buckeyes have been that they can post nearly a three-touchdown spread on a Top 10, one loss opponent, but that's the story of HC Ryan Day's inaugural squad, who have topped my in-season power ratings since September. Measured in net points per game (NPG), the offensive explosiveness and balance is stunning: +14.5 in rush offense; +13.0 in pass offense. In other words, the offense *alone* is worth about four touchdowns more than an average statistical unit. When adjusting for strength of schedule (SOS), Ohio State ranks #1 in the nation in scoring offense. The defense isn't half bad, either...coming in at #2 in SOS-adjusted scoring defense.

To put that into perspective, imagine pairing Oklahoma's offense with Clemson's defense. That would be *almost* as good as 2019 Ohio State. In those terms, it does become difficult to imagine anyone toppling the Buckeyes, in the Big Ten East, the conference championship game, or even in the College Football Playoff.

Is there a weakness that is remotely exploitable? Analyzing by the topline NPG numbers, the softest spot is rush defense at +4.6. That's not bad by any means, but if looking for a way Penn State drags this down into a single-score contest, that's the first place to look. The Nittany Lions run effectively with a pair of good backs behind a solid OL, and Sean Clifford adds the valuable third dimension of a willing QB run game, accounting for 17% of the total rush offense impact, higher than either of the primary RBs. Certainly a committed ground game is critical to both limiting the total number of drives--a fast pace game favors Ohio State--and to keeping Penn State out of the passing game danger zone. The combination of top-flight corners Shaun Wade, Jeff Okudah, and Damon Arnette and the return of stellar DE Chase Young (100; A+) should warrant every bit of caution. Strategically, Penn State would be wise to avoid the lethal trap of throwing in obvious throwing situations, which plays directly to the strength of the Buckeye defense and unleashes Young off the edge. Third-and-long situations should lean toward run plays or at least quick, safe passes.

It would take a whole village, so to speak, for the Lions to pull this seismic upset. Ohio State has star power, on both sides of the ball, that Penn State can't match--as further evidence of that, I've gotten this far without even mentioning Heisman candidate Justin Fields (98; A+), one of the very best players in the land. Ultimately, I tend to think Penn State can give the nation's top team a competitive game. Hanging in there until the fourth quarter will require taking care of the football, avoiding trap situations, keeping the game as short as possible, and making the explosive Buckeye offense at least earn their way downfield before giving up points. It's a lot to ask.

A couple other conference games to keep an eye on during the breaks: **★ #21 Oklahoma State at West Virginia (ESPN2 12:00)** and **★★ #10 Minnesota at Northwestern (ABC 12:00)**. It's a longshot, but the Cowboys have a narrow road to the crown that hinges on a TCU upset of Oklahoma (more on that below) setting up Bedlam for the slot opposite Baylor in the Big XII Championship game--although the loss of QB Spencer Sanders put a real damper on those hopes. Meanwhile, Minnesota is wounded after losing more than their undefeated season in Iowa City last week, as the QB situation is on thin ice with Tanner Morgan possibly unavailable due to concussion. Northwestern has been all kinds of awful all year--their offense is especially hopeless, regardless of who takes the snaps--but they actually still field a competitive defense that could grind this game down into a potential disaster for the aspirational Golden Gophers.

Predictions

#8 Penn State 23

#2 Ohio State 37

#21 Oklahoma State 39

West Virginia 27

#10 Minnesota 29

Northwestern 14

The afternoon is a crowded affair without a single game clearly commanding all attention. This is a good time to fire up multiple screens--TVs, laptops, cell phones, whatever it takes.

A couple appealing games, such as ★★ **Texas at #14 Baylor (FS1 3:30)** and ★ **#13 Michigan at Indiana (ESPN 3:30)**, are more about bowl game positioning than conference races--unless, as a Longhorn, you cling to a distant hope that Kansas will upset Baylor in Week 14, opening up a pathway to the conference championship. [*Spoiler: Baylor is not going to lose to Kansas next week.*] Of all four teams, clearly Baylor has the most to lose. It would take all the right kind of chaos, but if they can run the table and avenge their collapse against Oklahoma in the championship game and enough teams beat each other up, they at least would have an argument for CFP inclusion. More likely they would have to settle for the NY6 consolation prize, which would still represent an incredible achievement for a team picked to finish sixth in the Big XII preseason consensus.

Another good matchup is one of those "*every game matters in the ACC Coastal!*" affairs between ★ **Pittsburgh and Virginia Tech (ESPN2 3:30)**. It may not resonate on a national scale, but both teams are quietly 7-3 (4-2) and still alive in the Coastal division. Forgotten Virginia Tech actually controls their own destiny, as they play in-state rival Virginia--who sits atop the division with a 5-2 record--in Charlottesville on Black Friday. Pitt, down a tiebreaker due to a Week 1 loss to Virginia, needs to run the table (Virginia Tech; Boston College) *and* rely on the Hokies to knock off the Hoos. That trifecta will be tough, as all three of those games are fairly even matchups, giving them roughly a 1-in-8 shot of representing the Coastal against Clemson in December.

The top two games of the afternoon both have direct bearing on the New Year's Six selection show: ★★ ★ **#25 SMU at Navy (CBSSN 3:30)** and ★★ ★ **Texas A&M at #4 Georgia (CBS 3:30)**.

The American is the 2019 standard-bearer of the G5 conferences, and with two weeks remaining, the championship picture is still uncertain. SMU and Navy are two of the three teams in the American West with a 5-1 conference record--along with Memphis, who should prevail over South Florida in their coincident game and rise to 6-1. Notably, Memphis holds tiebreakers over *both* SMU and Navy, but there is good news for the winner between the Mustangs and Midshipmen, as Memphis concludes their season with a losable home game against #19 Cincinnati. That cracks open the door and keeps all three teams currently alive in the race, pending today's outcomes.

While Navy hit the skids in an unexpectedly poor performance in South Bend, I believe that was more of an outlier to their overall quality than an indicator. With service academy teams, much can depend on rhythm and matchups, and in that vein SMU does not have the quality run defense (-0.7 NPG) to consistently clog up the option works. This should be a high-scoring and highly entertaining clash of

significance between two teams with contrasting styles--SMU's aerial assault checks in at +12.3 NPG, second only to Memphis in the conference.

Lastly, while neither Texas A&M nor Georgia have anything to lose or gain in the SEC race, the shadow of the College Football Playoff stretches over Athens. Despite what looked like a crippling loss to mediocre South Carolina, the Bulldogs are in the coveted Top 4 of the CFP rankings with but a few games remaining--their finale is a no-trouble trip to reconstructing Georgia Tech that won't cause them problems.

If Georgia lets their gaze drift ahead to their looming confrontation with #1 LSU in the SEC Championship, they could get caught by an A&M squad that is significantly better than the Gamecock team that dumped Georgia midseason. The Dawgs are favored and should be, but this game could be closer than expected, as the Aggies are fairly well balanced, pretty good in most aspects of the game and--though they are currently unranked--are a Top 25-caliber team in their own right. The Aggies are capable of winning this game, which would send a shockwave through the playoff foundation--especially if Georgia went on to win the SEC as a two-loss champion.

Predictions

Texas 30

#14 Baylor 31

#13 Michigan 34

Indiana 23

Pittsburgh 24

Virginia Tech 25

#25 SMU 36

Navy 39

Texas A&M 21

#4 Georgia 31

After the whirlwind of meaningful games in the afternoon, the significant primetime games are staggered a half hour apart, beginning with ★★ **Temple at #19 Cincinnati (ESPN2 7:00)**. The Temple Owls have been up and down throughout the year, but at their peaks, they are capable of playing excellent football behind a stubborn, unyielding defense. Getting the Owls at their best is what Cincinnati should be concerned about, as they are limping into this game after a forgettable 20-17 survival win over South Florida, probably the team that disappointed most in the American this season. The good news for Cincinnati is that if they win--and they remain a double-digit favorite--they are in, setting up possibly back-to-back games against Memphis (Nov. 30th; AAC Championship) to finish the year.

One not to overlook is ★★ **#6 Oregon at Arizona State (ABC 7:30)**, a somewhat dangerous road trip for the CFP-hopeful Ducks. Like Georgia, Oregon knows it is bound for the conference title game, and it's human nature to look ahead to the monumental clash with Utah with potentially a CFP slot as the victor's prize. But Arizona State--a bit like Temple--can play good football and square up as a dangerous opponent on the right evening.

Lastly, ★★ **TCU at #9 Oklahoma (FOX 8:00)** continues this trap game theme of many of the contenders this week, which is to remain focused and avoid stepping on a landmine. While TCU has underperformed, staking out a disappointing 5-5 record thus far, the Horned Frogs are nonetheless a capable opponent, on the Top 25 fringe in terms of overall power rankings, which is pretty high for a five-loss outfit. TCU has one of the best staffs in the Big XII, and if elite defensive coaches Gary Patterson and Chad Glasgow can draft a plan-- informed by Baylor's first-half blueprint last week--to stymie Jalen Hurts and the Sooner Express, then the TCU run game should be able to settle in and push the OU front around, slowing down the game and giving the underdogs a chance.

Predictions

Temple 16

#19 Cincinnati 31

#6 Oregon 34

Arizona State 21

TCU 28

#9 Oklahoma 42

Finally, the only non-AAC team with a shot at the G5 berth in the NY6 is the usual suspect: ★★ **#20 Boise State at Utah State (CBSSN 10:30)** carries both national implications and MWC importance, as Utah State is sitting in prime takeover position at 5-1 in conference. Getting the Broncos at home, the Aggies have a golden opportunity to upend the race for the conference championship.

Boise is the superior team but is not the same dominant force as past iterations, checking in at #38 in the power rankings. The Broncos are solid in all aspects but not dominant in any particular phase of the game, so like most good-but-not-great teams, a few mistakes or turnovers and this important game could slip through their fingers.

Prediction

#20 Boise State 35

Utah State 26