

College Football Viewer's Guide: Week 11

A statistical overview of the week in college football

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The Willie Taggart hire never made much sense for Florida State. According to my coaching efficiency metric, which analyzes the effectiveness of units under the responsibility of a particular coach, Taggart's overall percentile since 2005 was a substandard 18 (D grade). Considering his overall experience percentile is 96, those low marks were based on mountains of evidence of inferior coaching over a long period of time. Taggart cobbled together a strong staff, but the pieces didn't cohere quickly enough, and now he's out of a job--the second head coaching casualty of the 2019 season--as the carousel starts to spin.

Another embattled head coach, Clay Helton of USC, deserves more time. Helton entered the season with a coaching percentile of 61 (B)--not great but not bad, and just a few days ago, the Trojans controlled their own destiny in the Pac-12 South. Defensively, USC has struggled, but considering the overhaul on that side of the ball--only 47% returning production in 2019, which ranked #114 in the nation--it is perhaps unsurprising that the Trojans have slipped (-8.5 net points per game, or NPG) defensively. The defensive staff isn't particularly strong, so if changes need to be made, they should be tweaks at the assistant level, not a full-blown restart inspired by fever dreams of mercenary HC Urban Meyer riding in to lead them for a few years.

USC's lopsided loss to Oregon, along with Utah's narrow victory on the road at Washington, set up a clear collision course between the Pac-12's top two teams and only playoff hunters remaining. Oregon is in; Utah, having notched the lead in the South and now in control of their own destiny, looks poised to win out and meet the Ducks in the title game everyone wants to see. If both teams enter that game 11-1, it effectively becomes a CFP quarterfinal.

The SEC East question was answered, as Georgia stifled Florida's run game to tilt the division in their favor. The Bulldogs virtually punched their ticket to the SEC Championship (they can now afford another loss, for example, on the road at Auburn) where the winner of LSU/Alabama will await.

Between the first CFP Committee rankings and two games between undefeated teams, Week 11 ratchets up the New Year's Six intensity. The postseason picture will crystallize week after week as important head-to-head matchups are resolved on the field.

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.

Tuesday, November 5

It's the first full week of November, and that means midweek MACtion takes over Tuesday and Wednesday nights, bringing a conference that often gets lost in the shuffle into the national spotlight. The initial offerings of early-week MAC games all have conference championship stakes, starting with **Kent State at Toledo (CBSSN 7:00)** and **★ Ball State at Western Michigan (ESPN2 8:00)** on Tuesday night.

At the time of this posting, these games are well underway (as I awaited the release of the inaugural CFP committee rankings for 2019, which always have some notable differences from the standard-issue AP and Coaches Polls). Toledo is currently in a tight cluster of MAC West teams vying for divisional control. In a race that should go down to the final week of the season, the Rockets can't afford to drop a crossover game to Kent State if they hope to keep abreast of league leaders like Ball State. The matchup strongly favors Toledo's run game, which checks in at +7.0 NPG versus Kent's lackluster -8.2 NPG in rush defense. RB Bryant Koback shoulders the load with a 29% rush offense impact rating, which measures how much of the total productivity in the run game comes from a specific player, a very high number considering blocking effects are also factored in. Mitchell Guadagni (84; A-) is a true dual-threat and will complement Koback on the ground.

Ball State currently leads the MAC West at 3-1 in conference play. A win versus 3-2 Western Michigan would practically eliminate the Broncos from contention, so this is must-win territory for WMU. The Broncos will lean on their exceptionally balanced offense (+7.8 NPG rushing; +7.9 NPG passing) to keep the Cardinal defense off guard. Feature back LeVante Bellamy (89; A) and freshman backup Sean Tyler (86; A) are some of the best pure ball carriers in the MAC; TE Giovanni Ricci (85; A) is QB Jon Wassink's top target in the passing game.

Predictions

Kent State 28

Toledo 36

Ball State 28

Western Michigan 36

Wednesday, November 6

★ Miami OH at Ohio (ESPN2 8:00), on center stage as the only offering on hump night, is the third of three important MAC games to kick off the week. Ohio's season has not gone as portended analytically in the preseason. Frank Solich's Bobcats were the second-biggest divisional favorite in the nation in August, with a commanding 75% chance to win the MAC East--only Clemson (93% to win ACC Atlantic) had a larger head-start over the field to begin the 2019 campaign. Ohio possessed a lofty 10-win regular season expectation, but that target was dashed weeks ago, as they have slipped quietly to a 4-4 record (win expectation down to 7) with 4 to play. Despite the off-the-radar underperformance, Ohio is 3-1 in conference and remains a co-favorite in the MAC East with...Miami OH, who also sits at 3-1, raising the stakes of this matchup between frontrunners.

Both teams are significantly better offensively than defensively, in terms of net points; the clearest daylight between them is Ohio's rush offense edge. SR QB Nathan Rourke has been dominant in this

phase, as he has throughout his career; the biggest setback to the Bobcats' season has probably been some regression in Rourke's passing efficiency percentiles between 2018 (71; B+) and 2019 (55; B-).

Prediction

Miami OH 28

Ohio 37

Thursday, November 7

Stylistically, **Louisiana at Coastal Carolina (ESPNU 7:30)** offers something to fans of a well-executed ground game and especially elite RB play, as the Sun Belt West favorite Ragin' Cajuns produce one of the deepest groups of ball carriers in the country. Whether it's Elijah Mitchell, Raymond Calais, or Trey Ragas, each of the backs rates in the 87 - 93 percentile range in run game efficiency, and all have contributed about equally over the course of the season. Louisiana is in a very strong position in the West, owning the tiebreaker over preseason favorite Arkansas State, their only competitor expected to finish within two games of the Cajuns in conference record. Expect to see Louisiana in the Sun Belt Championship game in December.

A half hour later, **Temple at South Florida (ESPN 8:00)** gets underway, a game between two once-hopeful teams who have fallen off the pace in the American East division--and in USF's case, they haven't factored into the discussion all season, except as a footnote of disappointment and looming questions about the long-term viability of HC Charlie Strong. A win over Temple (who is maddeningly inconsistent defensively), would be a good thing for Coach Strong's future, given that the closing gauntlet of Cincinnati, Memphis, and UCF probably means three straight losses to finish 2019 and a sour aftertaste in the mouths of fans and boosters.

Predictions

Louisiana 33

Coastal Carolina 24

Temple 25

South Florida 26

Friday, November 8

A preseason consensus favorite in the American Athletic Conference, the UCF fast-pace, high-flying offense encountered some unexpected turbulence leading up to the midpoint of the season: first dropping a stunner at Pittsburgh (before it was known that Pitt's defense, especially their pass rush, was quite strong this year) before dropping the head-to-head against co-favorite Cincinnati a couple weeks later. Cincinnati--as well as West division teams like SMU and Memphis--stole the limelight usually reserved for UCF in the nation's premier Group of Five conference.

Since those disappointments, the Knights--without too much attention--have been resurgent, taking out East Carolina, Temple, and Houston in consecutive weeks. **UCF at Tulsa (ESPN2 7:00)** should make it four in a row; after a bye week, a testy road trip to Tulane awaits the following week. Besides winning out, the Knights need Cincinnati to drop two games the rest of the way, which is unlikely but not impossible.

In the late night game, **Washington at Oregon State (FS1 10:30)**, the surprise story may simply be that an Oregon State win wouldn't shock many people. The 2019 Washington will finish up as one of those teams better than their overall record (currently 5-4) indicates--the Huskies are currently #17 in my drive-based power ratings, which corrects for pace-of-play disparities. That said, losses are still losses, and this season has been a tremendous disappointment for the preseason Pac-12 North favorite.

Oregon State, though something near a disaster defensively, has enough offensive firepower (+17.0 NPG) to make a game of it when everything is clicking. Washington will likely win, but it may not be easy.

Predictions

UCF 40

Tulsa 28

Washington 44

Oregon State 31

Saturday, November 9

The first game of 2019 between two undefeated teams in the CFP rankings, **★★★ #4 Penn State at #17 Minnesota (ABC 12:00)**, represents something of a show-me game for P.J. Fleck's 8-0 Golden Gophers, a team that squeaked by in the nonconference against underrated teams like FCS power South Dakota State and the Sun Belt's Georgia Southern, who ended App State's perfect season last week. Ripping off a 5-0 conference start against mediocre opposition in the Big Ten hasn't fully convinced everyone that Minnesota is "for real" (and they haven't gotten much attention in the Viewer's Guide this year). A win on Saturday changes that instantly, as no one can doubt Penn State's status as a marquee opponent.

Reflecting the Twin Cities where they are located, there are dual explanations for Minnesota's season. The first is that they have been the fortunate beneficiaries of close wins (including several game-winning final drives) and are due for a reality check, with their direst challenges backloaded in November, starting with the Nittany Lions. The other is that the Gophers were already poised, in the preseason, to take a big step forward, based on bringing back the second-most experienced offense in the nation, and were expected to benefit from a favorable schedule that led them to be my preseason favorite in the Big Ten West.

Statistically, the offense is strong and balanced, posting +5.7 NPG on the ground and +8.7 NPG in the pass game. The skill talent is legitimate, from QB Tanner Morgan (86; A) to the tandem of WRs Tyler Johnson (80; A-) and Rashod Bateman (87; A) to the resurgent senior season of longtime Gopher RB Rodney Smith (81; A-).

Given this litany, it might be surmised I'd lean toward picking the Minnesota upset, but I don't: Penn State is still one of the top teams in the nation (#5 power rating) and has virtually no weakness...unless you count average special teams and discipline as a weakness. Ultimately, I believe a 10-0 Penn State team will travel to the Horseshoe on November 23rd for one of the two biggest games of the regular season.

Also keep an eye on ★★ **#12 Baylor at TCU (FS1 12:00)**, another survival game for the undefeated Bears in the balanced Big XII. TCU, at 4-4 (2-3), may not seem much of a threat, but records can be deceiving: Baylor is #21 in drive-based power ratings, while TCU isn't far behind at #27. When you're an overachieving upstart trying to ambush the conference heavyweights, like Baylor is in 2019, upsets lurk in unexpected places. I think hometown TCU, after a TD loss in Stillwater to Oklahoma State last week, bounces back and scuttles Baylor's perfect season.

Predictions

Penn State 31

Minnesota 24

Baylor 24

TCU 28

The Week 13 game between Penn State and Ohio State was just mentioned as one of the two games of the year (regular season)--and, to no one's surprise, this is the other one: ★★ ★ **#2 LSU at #3 Alabama (CBS 3:30)**, a blood-feud rivalry that has thrilled college football fans with many classics over the years. Quite obviously, the SEC West crown goes to the victor, which vaults them into a powerful playoff slot, with only the SEC Championship game versus Georgia as a potential roadblock.

The statistical profile of these teams, in terms of net points, looks remarkably similar (Alabama / LSU):

- Rush Offense: +6.3 / +4.9
- Pass Offense: +19.7 / +18.9
- Rush Defense: +3.4 / +5.0
- Pass Defense: +9.3 / +1.3
- Special Teams: -3.0 / -2.4
- Penalties: -2.2 / -1.0

The only substantial disparity is the Crimson Tide's edge in pass defense--besides that, the two teams align about as closely as possible, which means the game likely boils down to execution and luck rather than talent and coaching. While Alabama owns that eight-point advantage in pass defense, LSU counters with a stronger schedule to date--the Tigers are more battle-tested, which can have an intangible mental effect in a contest of this magnitude.

The elephant in the room is Tide QB Tua Tagavailoa's (99; A+) status for the game. Mac Jones played capably as a backup, but of course Tua's availability is paramount for Nick Saban's squad. I'm assuming he plays and leads the Tide to the biggest win in college football this season.

Given the gravitas of LSU/Bama, it can be hard to keep track of other happenings, but ★★ **#16 Kansas State at Texas (ESPN 3:30)** and ★★ **#18 Iowa at #13 Wisconsin (FOX 4:00)** are both major games in their own right. The winner of KSU/Texas stays very much alive for the second slot in the Big XII Championship game, especially if TCU knocks off Baylor. Similarly, the winner of Iowa/Wisconsin is a major beneficiary if Minnesota loses to Penn State: both teams have yet to play the Gophers, which would mean control of their own Big Ten destiny and a clear path to the conference championship against the winner of the upcoming OSU/PSU game in the East.

Predictions

LSU 31

Alabama 42

Kansas State 27

Texas 33

Iowa 16

Wisconsin 26

After the intense action of the noon and afternoon games, primetime is a bit quieter than normal, as there aren't too many competitive games of consequence. ★ ★ ★ **Iowa State at #9 Oklahoma (FOX 8:00)**, however, is an exception that deserves your focused attention in the afternoon aftermath.

I've written before about the prolific Cyclone offense, but I'll write it again, as some teams simply are not typically associated with certain characteristics. While everyone knows Oklahoma is one of the best offenses in the land (#3 drive-based, schedule-adjusted scoring offense, behind Ohio State and Alabama), few but the most observant college football fans would think of Iowa State as a Top 10 offense (currently #8).

At QB, Brock Purdy has actually been considerably more inefficient than last year (69th percentile in 2019 vs 89th percentile in 2018), which seems like an incongruity. But that 69 rating--which isn't adjusted for opponents--has come against a pretty tough schedule overall, and other players have stepped up: TE Charlie Kolar, who has emerged as the top target, is playing at an All-American level (98; A+) and should give the Sooner defense all kinds of problems, and newcomer RB Breece Hall (81; A-) is a welcome replacement for the void left by last year's do-everything star David Montgomery.

Iowa State has partially closed the gap offensively, and they also possess a decided defensive advantage over the sometimes-leaky Sooner unit. That may not be enough on the road, but in a potential shootout like this, a few plays could swing it one way or the other. This should be a good one.

Prediction

Iowa State 32

Oklahoma 41

If you have the stamina, one other CFP-ranked team is in some danger late into the night. ★ **Wyoming at #22 Boise State (ESPN 10:15)** is a great opportunity for the Cowboys (3-1 in conference) to leapfrog up the rankings. Easier said than done, of course, against the class of the conference, but don't count Wyoming out, as they have quietly played good football most of the season. The Cowboys are especially strong running the football (+7.4 NPG) behind freshman Sean Chambers, one of the best and most prolific rushing quarterbacks in college football.

Expecting the frosh QB, who Wyoming relies on heavily, to storm the blue turf and lead the Cowboys to victory may be too much to ask, but the effort should be entertaining nonetheless.

Prediction

Wyoming 21

Boise State 33