

College Football Viewer's Guide: Week 12

A statistical overview of the week in college football

@mcillecesports

This chapter was different. For years, Alabama/LSU was a game of the classical SEC style: reliable run games, overwhelming defenses, the occasional special teams theatrics but relatively low-scoring. But Saturday's clash between two of the top three CFP-ranked teams in the nation, instead, morphed into a shootout. LSU's offensive fireworks were on full display yet again, undeterred by the historical pedigree of the Crimson Tide defense, and shot through a flimsy Alabama secondary. To their credit, the Tide rallied back from what looked like a rout at halftime, but in the end they couldn't get off the field defensively when they needed to most. And though Alabama's 41 points scored should have been enough, it was clear that QB Tua Tagovailoa wasn't fully mobile, seemingly unwilling to scramble at key moments, which may have cost the Tide the insider's path to the College Football Playoff.

In the other battle of unbeatens, Minnesota defied its too-low rankings in the polls and analytical score predictions (including those here), as QB Tanner Morgan directed a nearly perfect passing game in an early shredding of the vaunted Nittany Lion defense. A well-rounded team, Penn State clawed back into it to make it a four-quarter gut check for the Golden Gophers, but as they've done all year, Minnesota rose to the occasion and emerged victorious from a hard-fought contest. The difference, of course, is that now Minnesota has an undeniable signature victory (PSU was ranked #4 in last week's CFP rankings) under their belt.

Despite the top-quality victory, P.J. Fleck and Minnesota are not receiving the credit they deserve--ranked three slots behind Alabama, whose best win is against a 6-3 Texas A&M team and whose best game is a close loss to LSU, who looked more dominant than the final scoreline suggested. Alabama is still one of the best teams in the nation, but wins and losses are supposed to matter--and especially a win against a Top 4 team should count for more than a loss to a Top 4 team.

But to avoid hyperventilating about rankings, much will still shake itself out before and during championship week.

In the biggest games of Week 12, Minnesota faces another daunting challenge, the Big XII offers up a potential preview of its conference championship game, and Auburn gets its first of two cracks at playing College Football Playoff spoiler. (*Note: Due to time constraints, I skipped the weeknight MAC games this week.*)

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.

Thursday, November 14

In the Viewer's Guide opener of the week, ★ **Pittsburgh hosts North Carolina (ESPN 8:00)** in a must-win game to keep pace with the division-leading Virginia Cavaliers. While the Pitt defense has been a revelation this season--especially its ferocious pass rush, which has led to an overall pass defense value worth nearly 11 net points per game (NPG)--the underwhelming offense (-5.1 NPG) has cost them in critical losses to divisional rivals Virginia and Miami. Due to those losses, Pitt's narrow path to the ACC Championship requires an unlikely 3-0 finish against UNC, Virginia Tech, and Boston College...and a Virginia loss to Virginia Tech on November 29. It's unlikely (but not impossible) they can thread that needle.

Mack Brown and the North Carolina Tar Heels were one of the stories of September, culminating in the near-upset (failed two-point conversion) of the defending national champion Clemson Tigers. Now, sitting at 4-5, Mack is scrapping to reach a bowl game. A road win over Pitt would guarantee at least a six-win season with Mercer on deck.

Prediction

North Carolina 23

Pittsburgh 27

Friday, November 15

A pair of intriguing Group of Five games with conference stakes bring some life to Friday night, beginning with ★ **Louisiana Tech at Marshall (CBSSN 7:00)**, a crossover matchup between two teams still in the C-USA hunt. Louisiana Tech features a potent, balanced offense led by dual-threat senior J'Mar Smith (84; A-), workhorse back Justin Henderson (88; A), and a strong and experienced offensive line comprising almost entirely upperclassmen. Marshall is also solid in the run game (+4.4 NPG), and while they have been vulnerable defensively, this fairly close matchup could be decided by the homefield advantage and an edge in special teams and penalties. The victor takes a huge leap forward in their respective divisional races.

Later in the Mountain West, ★ **Fresno State at San Diego State (ESPN2 9:30)** gives the Bulldogs a chance to upend the entire MWC West division. San Diego State is undoubtedly in the pole position, sitting in first place with a 4-2 conference record with critical games remaining against contenders Fresno (2-3) and Hawai'i (3-3). With Hawai'i likely scoring a win against UNLV this week and Nevada (3-3) on bye, a Fresno upset would create a bottleneck of four teams knotted up with three conference losses apiece.

Given San Diego State's uncharacteristically weak rush offense (-3.2 NPG), strong defense (+8.1 NPG), and the overall laggard pace of play by both teams, expect a close, low-scoring affair that could tip either way.

Predictions

Louisiana Tech 27

Marshall 29

Fresno State 20
San Diego State 21

Saturday, November 16

It's hard to believe there are only three regular-season Saturdays remaining. While this particular mid-November noon slate is a bit light on feature matchups, there are some interesting games across the Big Ten, including some landmines for teams in contention to avoid.

Two teams who still control their own conference destinies have to watch out for letdowns after playing in some of Week 11's biggest games: ★ **Indiana at #9 Penn State (ABC 12:00)** and **#14 Wisconsin at Nebraska (BTN 12:00)**. While both Penn State and Wisconsin are strong favorites to notch early victories and march on toward their most important games (PSU at Ohio State on Nov. 23; Wisconsin at Minnesota on Nov. 30), neither team is invulnerable to a surprise upset.

Penn State, in particular, would appear to be in danger to 7-2 Indiana, who has already exceeded their preseason expected win total for the 2019 regular season. The Hoosiers suffered a blow when promising freshman QB Michael Penix Jr. (71; B+) was lost for the year to injury, but they had a luxury few teams have: a backup QB who was a full-time starter--and a good one--a year ago. While most QBs in Peyton Ramsey's shoes would have long since beamed out via the transfer portal, the junior stuck around and again has the reins of the Hoosier offense. Expect WR Whop Philyor (71; B+) and TE Peyton Hendershot (84; A-) to be his top targets against the Nittany Lions.

Wisconsin and star RB Jonathan Taylor, meanwhile, should muscle through Nebraska's grasping rush defense (-4.0 NPG). The real disappointment of the 2019 Cornhusker season is the offense, which had promise in the preseason but failed to live up to the hype. The offensive line and QB Adrian Martinez (43; C) have both regressed from last season, a bad sign in year two of a reconstruction project. In the short-term hunt for a bowl game, backup QB Noah Vedral (61; B) may be a better option under center (or in the shotgun, I should say), as he has outplayed Martinez in limited opportunities.

Lastly, while neither team remains in contention in the Big Ten East, ★ **Michigan State at #15 Michigan (FOX 12:00)** is a bitter rivalry that almost always delivers a compelling game. The embarrassed Spartans are reeling after their memorable collapse to Illinois last week, while the Wolverines have been playing pretty good football for a while after an inauspicious September.

Predictions

Indiana 19
#9 Penn State 36

#14 Wisconsin 39
Nebraska 20

Michigan State 18
#15 Michigan 27

A loaded afternoon set gets underway an hour early, as ★★ **#23 Navy travels to #16 Notre Dame (NBC 2:30)** in a game that could yet have bearing on the New Year's Six. Navy, despite a 7-1 record, has sailed beneath the radar much of the season in the crowded American Athletic Conference, as buzzer teams like SMU and Cincinnati have garnered more attention. But that changes these next two weeks, as games against the Irish and SMU (who will be ranked next week after a bye) shine a brighter spotlight on Ken Niumatololo's crew.

On paper, this is a very even matchup: Navy's drive-based power rating--which accounts for net points per drive and strength of schedule--is #16, while Notre Dame's is actually a few slots behind at #19. The Middies have the most prolific run game in the land (+17.7 NPG) and are generally decent in all the other major categories. That could nullify Notre Dame's best attribute, which is a +7.0 NPG pass defense--a unit that will not see much coverage action unless the Irish force Navy to play at least two scores from behind in the second half.

Despite several performance indicators pointing Navy's way, I can't help but buy into the major talent advantage the Irish hold along with homefield edge. Notre Dame also has the advantage that it can play from behind, if necessary, whereas Navy can't likely afford that against the top-tier athletes on the field in South Bend.

Prediction

#23 Navy 23

#16 Notre Dame 37

In the regular afternoon slot, ★★★ **#4 Georgia at #12 Auburn (CBS 3:30)** is the first of two opportunities for Auburn to spoil the CFP hopes of SEC compatriots Georgia and Alabama (Nov 30 in the Iron Bowl). The Dawgs are already in playoff position, despite an earlier upset to massive underdog South Carolina. Georgia clearly holds their playoff fate in their own hands: to win out, they would have to beat both highly regarded Auburn and current #1 LSU in the SEC title game, which would cement their standing in the Top 4.

This matchup pits two of the best defenses in the nation against one another, with Auburn a close #2 to Ohio State and Georgia not far behind at #8 in schedule-adjusted scoring defense. While the Bulldog offensive line and top skill guys, like RB D'Andre Swift (89; A) and WR Lawrence Cager (94; A+), have been reliable, QB Jake Fromm's inefficiency throughout 2019 is a real concern throwing into the teeth of the SEC's best defense in their own den. Fromm, a pure dropback passer with only an 11th percentile run grade, doesn't have the elusiveness or athleticism to keep Auburn honest on scrambles. If the Tigers can contain Georgia's run game early, that will force Fromm into some uncomfortable passing situations that play into the home team's favor.

Make note that the other marquee game of the afternoon, ★★★ **#8 Minnesota at #20 Iowa (FOX 4:00)**, kicks off a half hour later. Is this, at long last, finally the game that puts an end to upstart Minnesota's perfect season? The Hawkeyes field a stout defense (#5), as usual, and feature a balanced if bland complementary offensive philosophy that tends to embroil opponents into Iowa's preferred kind of game. As will seem familiar to Big Ten observers, some of the best defensive players in the conference reside in Iowa City, from DEs A.J. Epenesa (80; A-) and Chauncey Golston (88; A) to LB Djimon Colbert (89; A) to coverage hawk DB Michael Odemudia (89; A).

Odemudia and the secondary will be challenged by Minnesota's professional passing game, led by Tanner Morgan (91; A) and NFL-caliber wideouts Rashod Bateman (95; A+)--who is still haunting Nittany nightmares--and Tyler Johnson (84; A-). Containing those two on the outside and in the slants will be the game within the game. Also watch out for some kicking concerns on the Minnesota side, which could come into play in Arctic-blasted Kinnick Stadium.

Lastly, yet another game with conference championship implications is ongoing in the Big XII, as ★ ★ **#19 Texas travels to Iowa State (FS1 3:30)** in one of the most important remaining games that doesn't include Oklahoma and/or Baylor. Frosty and windswept Jack Trice Stadium is no easy road trip for the Longhorns, especially since ISU's 5-4 record is completely unrepresentative of how good the Cyclones truly are. I rank Iowa State #12 in overall power rating, nine spots ahead of visiting Texas. While the Longhorns have the better shot at cracking the Big XII Championship game if Baylor falters, they have to get by the Cyclones first, and that will prove a daunting task.

Overall, I anticipate some great games, late-fall atmosphere, and classic college football chaos this Saturday afternoon.

Predictions

#4 Georgia 21

#12 Auburn 23

#8 Minnesota 22

#20 Iowa 25

#19 Texas 30

Iowa State 36

The final big-hitter of Week 12 lands in primetime: ★ ★ ★ **#10 Oklahoma at #13 Baylor (ABC 7:30)**, possibly game one of a two-game series, as these two squads are currently atop the round-robin Big XII standings. The winner has a clear lane and is nearly a lock for the conference championship game. Baylor's expected record would improve to a perfect 12-0 with an upset over the Sooners, an outcome no one could have foreseen in August or even September.

In the national conversation, LSU QB Joe Burrow (99; A+) is getting all the Heisman hype and has emerged as the presumed winner, but Sooner QB Jalen Hurts (100; A+) is the top offensive player nationally in terms of overall efficiency--barely edging out Clemson RB Travis Etienne and Burrow--and shouldn't be counted out just yet.

Another game with conference hopes on the line, which would've been hard to believe in September, is **UCLA at #7 Utah (FOX 8:00)**. Each team controls their own destiny in the Pac-12 South; however, this is where UCLA's midseason, conference surge runs into a brick wall against a far superior and more complete outfit in Kyle Whittingham's playoff contender Utes.

Predictions

#10 Oklahoma 40

#13 Baylor 31

UCLA 17

#7 Utah 39

In the first of two Pac-12 after dark matchups, **Arizona at #6 Oregon (ESPN 10:30)**, expect the Ducks to soar over the Wildcats without much trouble--Oregon should win out and run into Utah with a possible playoff slot on the line in the conference championship game. Although it won't impact the conference race, the more competitive game is **USC at California (FS1 11:00)** for any college football fans willing to stick it out into the AM hours. For USC coach Clay Helton, this game could be quite important, given their hire of a new AD and the smoke surrounding Helton's future with the Trojan program. Closing out with wins over Cal and UCLA and finishing at 8-4 *should* make it very difficult to remove a solid coach like Helton.

Predictions

Arizona 21

#6 Oregon 47

USC 24

California 20