



PRIME 16

Weekly College Football Ranking

By Jeff Shain

1. FLORIDA

- * Coach: Urban Meyer (5th year, 44-9; 83-17 overall).
- * Last season: 13-1. Beat Oklahoma 24-14 in BCS Championship.
- * Starters returning: 7 offense, 11 defense.
- * Players to watch: QB Tim Tebow, RB Jeff Demps, LB Brandon Spikes, CB Joe Haden, KR Brandon James.
- * They'll miss: WR Percy Harvin. Now it's up to Demps or someone else for a gamebreaking counter to Tebow's hammering.
- * Key test: Oct. 10 at LSU, Oct. 31 vs. Georgia (Jacksonville).
- * Final word: That's no typo. The defending national champ returns every starter on defense. Oh yeah -- and Tebow.

2. TEXAS

- * Coach: Mack Brown (12th year, 115-26; 201-100-1 overall).
- * Last season: 12-1. Beat Ohio St. 24-21 in Fiesta Bowl.
- * Starters returning: 9 offense, 7 defense.
- * Top players: QB Colt McCoy, WR Jordan Shipley, DE/LB Sergio Kindle, S Earl Thomas.
- * They'll miss: DE Brian Orakpo. With Orakpo and Kindle serving as bookends, Longhorns led the nation with 47 sacks.
- * Key tests: Oct. 17 vs. Oklahoma (Dallas), Oct. 31 at Oklahoma St.
- * Final word: Last year's Big 12 tiebreaker shortfall with Oklahoma still stings around Austin. Payback is the theme.

3. OHIO STATE

- * Coach: Jim Tressel (9th year, 83-19; 218-76-2 overall).
- * Last season: 10-3. Lost to Texas 24-21 in Fiesta Bowl.
- * Starters returning: 4 offense, 7 defense.
- * Top players: QB Terrelle Pryor, WR Ray Small, CB Chimdi Chekwa, SS Kurt Coleman.
- * They'll miss: RB Beanie Wells. Though he may have been injury-prone, those 3,382 rushing yards are tough to replace.
- * Key tests: Sept. 12 vs. USC, Nov. 7 at Penn St.
- * Final word: Not the sexiest No. 3 pick, but Pryor and plenty of defensive talent lifts Bucks atop next jumble.

4. OKLAHOMA

- * Coach: Bob Stoops (11th year, 109-24).
- * Last season: 12-2. Lost to Florida 24-14 in BCS Championship.

- * Starters returning: 5 offense, 9 defense.
- * Top players: QB Sam Bradford, TE Jermaine Gresham, DT Gerald McCoy, LB Travis Lewis.
- * They'll miss: LT Phil Loadholt. Bradford's chief protector is one of four OL starters the Sooners must replace.
- * Key tests: Oct. 17 vs. Texas (Dallas), Nov. 28 vs. Oklahoma St.
- * Final word: Losing to Texas didn't hurt OU last year. It'd be foolish to think that's not a rare instance.

5. MISSISSIPPI

- * Coach: Houston Nutt (2nd year, 9-4; 120-74 overall).
- * Last season: 9-4. Beat Texas Tech 47-34 in Cotton Bowl.
- * Starters returning: 8 offense, 8 defense.
- * Top players: QB Jevan Snead, WR Dexter McCluster, DE Greg Hardy, FS Kendrick Lewis.
- * They'll miss: DT Peria Jerry. Even with much returning strength up front, few DTs can boast of seven-sack seasons.
- * Key tests: Oct. 10 vs. Alabama, Nov. 21 vs. LSU.
- * Final word: Expectations haven't been this high in Oxford without a Manning on campus. Pressure's on.

6. LSU

- * Coach: Les Miles (5th year, 42-11; 70-32 overall).
- * Last season: 8-5. Beat Georgia Tech 38-3 in Chick-fil-A Bowl.
- * Starters returning: 7 offense, 6 defense.
- * Top players: RB Charles Scott, OT Ciron Black, DE Rahim Alem, FS Chad Jones.
- * They'll miss: DE Tyson Jackson. Though not a pass-rush fiend, Jackson's run-stuffing skills opened NFL scouts' eyes.
- * Key tests: Oct. 10 vs. Florida. Nov. 7 at Alabama.
- * Final word: QB Jordan Jefferson filled most glaring need at end of last season. As he goes, so does LSU.

7. VIRGINIA TECH

- * Coach: Frank Beamer (23rd year, 177-89-2; 219-112-4 overall).
- * Last season: 10-4. Beat Cincinnati 20-7 in Orange Bowl.
- * Starters returning: 9 offense, 7 defense.
- * Top players: QB Tyrod Taylor, TE Greg Boone, DE Jason Worilds, FS Kam Chancellor.
- * They'll miss: RB Darren Evans. Poised for big things after a 1,265-yard freshman season, he tore his ACL in fall camp.
- * Key tests: Saturday vs. Alabama (Atlanta), Oct. 17 at Georgia Tech.
- * Final word: Was higher on the list until injuries to Evans and fellow RBs Josh Oglesby and Kenny Lewis.

8. USC

- * Coach: Pete Carroll (9th year, 88-15).
- * Last season: 12-1. Beat Penn St. 38-24 in Rose Bowl.
- * Starters returning: 9 offense, 3 defense.
- * Top players: TB Joe McKnight, G Jeff Byers, DE Everson Griffen, FS Taylor Mays.
- * They'll miss: QB Mark Sanchez. Trojans thought they'd have him around for another year before turning over the job.
- * Key tests: Sept. 12 at Ohio St., Oct. 3 at California.
- * Final word: A curious call to anoint true freshman QB Matt Barkley, but nation's top O-line eases worry.

9. ALABAMA

- * Coach: Nick Saban (3rd year, 19-8; 110-50-1 overall).
- * Last season: 12-2. Lost to Utah 31-17 in Sugar Bowl.
- * Starters returning: 4 offense, 9 defense.
- * Top players: WR Julio Jones, G Mike Johnson, NT Terrence Cody, LB Rolando McClain.
- * They'll miss: LT Andre Smith. Bama got a sense of the impending loss when Utah held them to just 31 yards rushing.
- * Key tests: Saturday vs. Virginia Tech (Atlanta), Oct. 10 at Mississippi.
- * Final word: Tide defense may be nation's best. They'll need it as offense retools with QB Greg McElroy.

10. OKLAHOMA ST.

- * Coach: Mike Gundy (5th year, 27-23).
- * Last season: 9-4. Lost to Oregon 42-31 in Holiday Bowl.
- * Starters returning: 7 offense, 6 defense.
- * Top players: QB Zac Robinson, WR Dez Bryant, LB Andre Sexton, CB Perrish Cox.
- * They'll miss: TE Brandon Pettigrew. Big target essentially was Robinson's No. 2 option most of last season.
- * Key tests: Saturday vs. Georgia, Nov. 28 at Oklahoma.
- * Final word: Cowpokes will score in bunches, but defense must hold its own under coordinator Bill Young.

11. PENN STATE

- * Coach: Joe Paterno (44rd year, 383-127-3).
- * Last season: 11-2. Lost to USC 38-24 in Rose Bowl.
- * Starters returning: 5 offense, 4 defense.
- * Top players: QB Daryll Clark, RB Evan Royster, DT Jared Odrick, LB Sean Lee.
- * They'll miss: DE Aaron Maybin. His big-play exploits were the thread that bound a deep-but-unspectacular D-line.
- * Key tests: Oct. 3 at Illinois, Nov. 7 vs. Ohio St.
- * Final word: Another Big Ten crown rides on a green secondary, which has a combined nine college starts.

12. BOISE STATE

- * Coach: Chris Peterson (4th year, 35-4).
- * Last season: 12-1. Lost to TCU 17-16 in Poinsettia Bowl.
- * Starters returning: 6 offense, 5 defense.
- * Top players: QB Kellen Moore, WR Austin Pettis, CB Kyle Wilson, SS Jeron Johnson.
- * They'll miss: RB Ian Johnson. Reliable Fiesta Bowl '07 hero churned out 3,564 yards in past three seasons.
- * Key tests: Thursday vs. Oregon, Nov. 27 vs. Nevada.
- * Final word: Broncs had 12-0 regular season in what was thought a rebuilding year. Save them a BCS slot.

13. GEORGIA TECH

- * Coach: Paul Johnson (2nd year, 9-4; 116-43 overall).
- * Last season: 9-4. Lost to LSU 38-3 in Chick-fil-A Bowl.
- * Starters returning: 9 offense, 8 defense.
- * Top players: QB Josh Nesbitt, RB Jonathan Dwyer, DE Derrick Morgan, ROV Morgan Burnett.

* They'll miss: DE Michael Johnson. Speed demon off the edge became one of nation's most disruptive DEs.

* Key tests: Oct. 10 at Florida St., Oct. 17 vs. Va. Tech.

* Final word: The triple option confounded foes in '08 -- and may again as veteran group adds new wrinkles.

14. CALIFORNIA

* Coach: Jeff Tedford (8th year, 59-30).

* Last season: 9-4. Beat Miami 24-17 in Emerald Bowl.

* Starters returning: 7 offense, 8 defense.

* Top players: RB Jahvid Best, OT Mike Tepper, DT Tyson Alualu, CB Syd'Quan Thompson.

* They'll miss: LB Zack Follett. Of the four LBs Cal must replace, Follett (23 TFL) was known for his big hits.

* Key tests: Sept. 26 at Oregon, Oct. 3 vs. USC.

* Final word: If QB Kevin Riley and unproven WRS can provide offensive balance, Bears could surprise.

15. TCU

* Coach: Gary Patterson (9th year, 73-27).

* Last season: 11-2. Beat Boise St. 17-16 in Poinsettia Bowl.

* Starters returning: 6 offense, 5 defense.

* Top players: QB Andy Dalton, WR Jimmy Young, DE Jerry Hughes, CB Nick Sanders.

* They'll miss: LBs Jason Phillips and Robert Henson. Both were tremendous run-stoppers at center of Frogs' D.

* Key tests: Sept. 26 at Clemson, Oct. 24 at BYU.

* Final word: If Dalton stays healthy and a new set of LBs gels quickly, they may take a run up BCS table.

16. NOTRE DAME

* Coach: Charlie Weis (6th year, 29-21).

* Last season: 7-6. Beat Hawaii 49-21 in Hawaii Bowl.

* Starters returning: 9 offense, 6 defense.

* Top players: QB Jimmy Clausen, WR Michael Floyd, LB Brian Smith, SS Kyle McCarthy.

* They'll miss: Off. coordinator Mike Haywood. Weis couldn't find a replacement he liked, so he's calling plays again.

* Key tests: Sept. 19 vs. Michigan St., Oct. 17 vs. USC.

* Final word: Maybe a little generous here, but easier-than-usual schedule puts Irish in thick of BCS mix.

