

College Football Preseason Preview 2019

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After a season where a handful of young quarterbacks stole the spotlight of college football in 2018, this upcoming season will have a lofty standard to live up to the influx of storylines that made last season so spectacular. 2018 featured three first time starters at QB finishing at the top of the Heisman voting, and a fourth (arguably better than all of them) who didn't even receive an invitation to the ceremony in New York! It also featured the highest scoring game in NCAA history in a 7OT thriller down in my neck of the woods at Kyle Field in College Station as Texas A&M knocked off 7th ranked LSU. In addition, two major droughts of A-list programs were ended as Florida and Texas each won double digit games and found success with new head coach hires in recent years. The debates definitely gained fuel in the later part of the season, as a 12 win Big 10 Champion Ohio State and an undefeated UCF team both felt they were snubbed from the College Football Playoff. In one of the most shocking games of the season, Clemson annihilated Nick Saban and Alabama to win the CFP, and marked the largest margin of defeat the team has suffered in the last decade. The drama continued with the rise in popularity of the Transfer Portal essentially resulting in College Football Free Agency.

With roster spots and depth charts starting to develop throughout the course of Spring Ball, a clearer picture of next season's potential is shaking out day by day. For some teams like Washington or Penn State, they will be starting from scratch after losing several 4-year starters who held huge roles on the offensive and defensive sides of the ball. In other cases, the strong are getting stronger as Alabama and Georgia both turned in top tier recruiting classes to top off already impressive rosters. Factoring in all of the information comprised at this point of the offseason, I will lay out my Top 25 for the start of next season:

- 1. Clemson**
- 2. Alabama**
- 3. Georgia**
- 4. Oklahoma**
- 5. Texas**
- 6. Ohio State**
- 7. Notre Dame**
- 8. Michigan**
- 9. Florida**
- 10. LSU**
- 11. Texas A&M**
- 12. Oregon**
- 13. Washington St.**
- 14. Missouri**
- 15. Iowa**
- 16. Utah**
- 17. UCF**
- 18. Washington**
- 19. Oklahoma St.**
- 20. Northwestern**
- 21. Syracuse**
- 22. Miami**
- 23. Penn State**
- 24. Army**
- 25. Auburn**

One factor that held significant weight in these rankings was the strength of schedule and strength of conference. For example, many people believe that Notre Dame should be ranked lower due to their blowout loss to end last season; however, their 2019 schedule yields a decent chance (combined with returning starters) to potentially return to the College Football Playoff should the committee forgive them for their horrific performance in last year's game vs Clemson. On the flip side, the Jimbo Fisher era has generated lots of buzz around the Texas A&M program the last couple of off seasons, yet they find themselves outside the top 10. To that, I present the fact that they possess the toughest strength of schedule in college football, and also happen to play in arguably the best conference in the SEC. After all, a team can only play the schedule put in front of them.

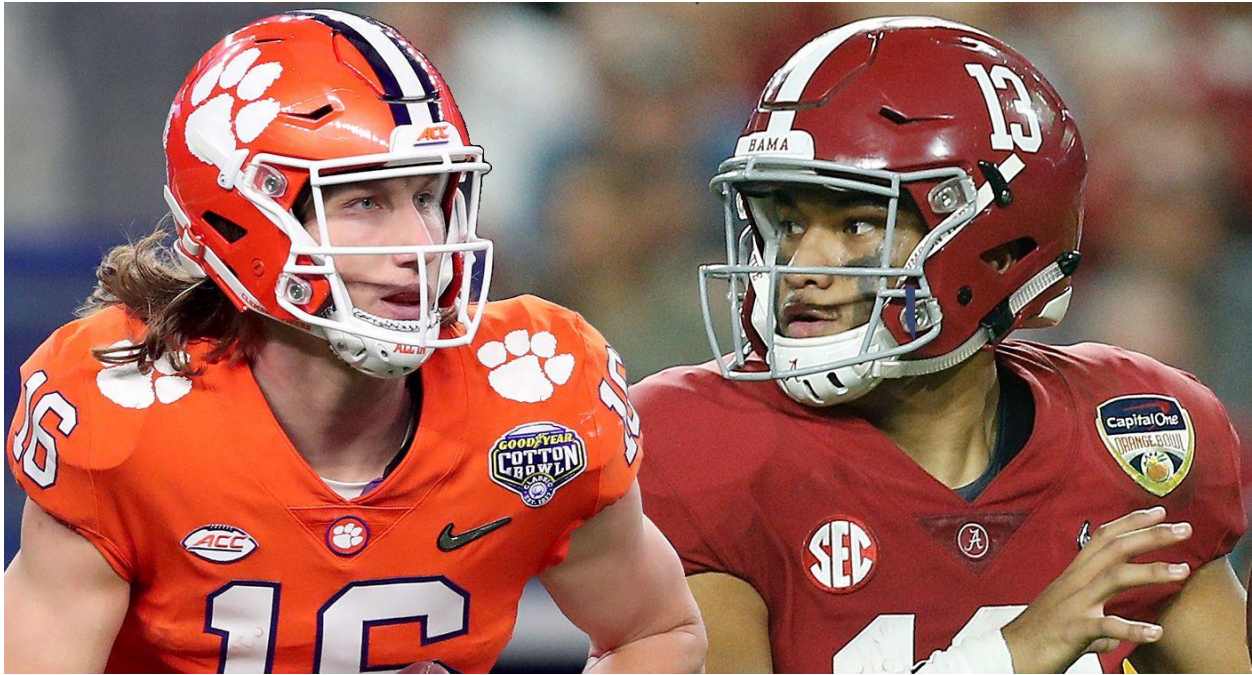
Narrowing Down the Contenders



As for the teams in 2019 who hold a realistic chance of becoming CFP contenders, the list is shorter than most people think. Overly optimistic thinking by analysts typically generates around 15-20 names of teams who are said to have a chance at making it in the playoff bracket after the regular season. In reality, this number is a lot closer to 10 or even less in any given year. For the 2019 season, there are 9 teams who hold the potential to grab a spot inside the Top 4 after the conclusion of Conference Championship week. Among those, are Clemson, Alabama, Georgia, Oklahoma, Texas, Ohio State, Notre Dame, Michigan, and Florida.

Unsurprisingly at the top of the list are the usual suspects Clemson and Alabama. There is a general consensus held in the college football world that these teams are virtually a shoe-in to contend, and possibly play each other in the Playoff for the 5th time in as many years. Below them is Georgia, Oklahoma, Texas, and Ohio State. There is a good chance that two or even three of these teams ends the season as 12-win Power 5 Conference Champion, likely providing a resume solid enough to cement a spot inside the Top 4 of the CFP Rankings. Georgia and Texas both return star Quarterbacks and are loaded with offensive weapons. In addition, both of these schools bolstered their squads by landing Top 5 recruiting classes for the 2nd straight year. Oklahoma and Ohio State are both losing Heisman caliber QB's to the NFL draft, but have replacements in the form of 5-star transfer Quarterbacks, combined with tremendous depth, and magnificent offensive minded Head Coaches. Rounding out the bunch are teams with an outside chance of sneaking in the playoff, including Notre Dame, Michigan, and Florida. All three of these teams won double digit games last year, made it to a New Year's Six Bowl, and are returning their starting Quarterbacks from the 2018 campaign. Though it would be fun to toss more team's names in the ring and craft scenarios where others have a chance, there is too much of a distinguished gap by these next-level teams compared to the rest of the competition.

Preseason Heisman Hopefuls



In a way too early Heisman watchlist forecast for the 2019 season, Quarterbacks dominate the top of the list, and rightfully so. Dating back to 2010, 8 of the last 9 winners of the award have been Quarterbacks. If one thing is for certain, it is that an offensive player will win the trophy in 2019. With the evolution of the game into a high scoring shootout featuring a pass first mentality, the odds lay out perfectly for the 68th offensive player to win the Heisman in the last 69 seasons. All that being said, here are the preseason favorites to win the 82nd Heisman trophy in New York next December:

1	Trevor Lawrence	QB	Clemson
2	Tua Tagovailoa	QB	Alabama
3	Jalen Hurts	QB	Oklahoma
4	Sam Ehlinger	QB	Texas
5	Justin Herbert	QB	Oregon
6	Jonathan Taylor	RB	Wisconsin
7	Justin Fields	QB	Ohio State
8	Travis Etienne	RB	Clemson

After a flawless performance against a stout Alabama defense in the Championship last season, Trevor Lawrence drew NFL comparisons as only a freshman in college. A group of high-caliber upperclassmen QBs comprise the next few spots behind Lawrence. Mixed in below are a pair of running backs with the potential to rush for over 2,000 yards next season, as well as the only player ranked above Trevor Lawrence in high school recruiting rankings being Justin Fields. This excludes any possible freshman standouts who have yet to play a down of CFB.

Best Matchups of the Season



Ordered by date, some of the best games of the season are listed below:

Texas A&M @ Clemson, 9/7
LSU @ Texas, 9/7
Notre Dame @ Georgia, 9/21
Oklahoma vs Texas (Dallas), 10/12
Alabama @ Texas A&M, 10/12
Florida @ LSU, 10/12
Washington State @ Oregon, 10/26
Notre Dame @ Michigan, 10/26
Georgia vs Florida (Jacksonville), 11/2
LSU @ Alabama, 11/9
Texas A&M @ Georgia, 11/23
Washington State @ Washington, 11/29
Ohio State @ Michigan, 11/30
Texas A&M @ LSU, 11/30
Alabama @ Auburn, 11/30

Though there will undoubtedly be several more outstanding games than the ones that made this list, these are poised to alter the state of the College Football Playoff picture. The SEC is featured the most in these key matchups, as the team (or possibly two) who can make it out of their gauntlet of a conference schedule will be a lock to make an appearance in the CFP. Personally, I believe the week of October 12th will showcase as the best weekend of the season.

Buy Low/Sell High



As with any season, some teams will receive high rankings simply from hype generated from a great recruiting class. On the flip side, a handful of teams will be left out of the conversation of contention due to a quiet offseason lacking any juicy headlines. That being said, I will break down the teams I believe are overrated and some dark horses for the 2019 season. Ranked teams will account for the majority of teams I discuss in this portion, as they hold more weight in determining contenders in their conferences and potentially the playoff. It should also be noted that teams like Kansas or Rutgers will be excluded in this section, as they don't hold any expectations for success, and likely won't be relevant in their respective conferences.

Buy: Washington State- After falling to Washington in the Apple Cup and the departure of Heisman finalist Gardner Minshew, nobody seems to have this team on their radar for next season. However, the Cougars landed a more than serviceable replacement via the transfer portal in Gage Gubrud, who dominated the FCS at Eastern Washington the last 2 seasons. I have no doubt that coach Mike Leach has got some tricks up his sleeve and will have the team reloaded and ready to surprise the PAC-12 in 2019.

Sell: Ohio State- With the departure of all-time legend coach Urban Meyer as well as the top rated Quarterback in the NFL draft, the Buckeyes will have big shoes to fill going forward. The team promoted a rising star and young OC in Ryan Day to head coach and hit the jackpot with former number one high school recruit Justin Fields transferring from Georgia to replace Dwayne Haskins at QB. Though the team's replacements definitely hold the credentials to carry on the dominance experienced in recent years, I wouldn't be surprised if the squad underwent a year of growing pains with all of the change and lack of experience in the program.

Buy: Iowa- Capping off a 9 win 2018 season with an impressive victory in the Outback bowl over Mississippi State, the Hawkeyes are carrying all kinds of momentum into 2019. The team should be able to take advantage of a weak Big 10 West Division and will benefit from experience at the Quarterback position with Nate Stanley returning for his senior season. Don't be surprised if this team wins 11 games in the regular season and makes a New Year's Six Bowl come January.

Sell: LSU- Ending the season on a high note with a Fiesta Bowl win over UCF, LSU deservedly sits in the top 10 of the majority of preseason polls. That being said, the team will be tested early and often having to travel to Austin to face the Texas Longhorns in Week 2. Plaguing the team for years now, the offense will likely be one-dimensional once again as QB Joe Burrow lacks consistency and accuracy in the passing game. Making matters worse, the team is losing loads of talent on the defensive side of the ball to the draft, increasing the amount of reliance on the offense against the stout defenses of the SEC.

Buy: Georgia- The 2019 offseason treated the Georgia tremendously after a disappointing 2018 campaign. Dropping their last two games to Alabama and Texas in disappointing fashion, the team ended the season headed in the wrong direction after such high expectations going into the season. The Bulldogs landed the 2nd ranked recruiting class in the nation featuring five 5-star recruits, including the highest rated recruit in the nation. Junior running back D'Andre Swift will shine as a standout in the backfield and lead a high caliber rushing attack looking to return to the playoff hunt once again.

Sell: UCF- A late season leg injury to star QB McKenzie Milton all but ended the slim chances of UCF sneaking into the CFP in 2018. Racking up 25 wins over the last 2 seasons, the team has made its way into the spotlight and paved a new course for a program that lacked national recognition for so long. Despite these successes in recent years, the weak strength of schedule of the American Conference coupled with a lack of true Power 5 competition in non-conference games holds the team back from CFP consideration and rightfully so. As seen last year in the Fiesta Bowl, the team ultimately isn't ready to matchup with the athletes on P5 rosters.

Buy: Oklahoma State- Expect a bounce back year from the Cowboys after underperforming in 2018 by their lofty standards. A 10-win season is definitely not out of the question the way their schedule lines up next season. Explosive wideout and Biletnikoff finalist Tylan Wallace will provide perimeter support to which ever new face starts at Quarterback for OSU. In a year where many Big 12 teams will be rebuilding and replacing starters at key positions, there is no doubt in my mind that Mike Gundy will take advantage of the situation as he has in the past.

Sell: Miami- There is no question that the U has a high ceiling looking towards the future after recent offseason moves. The hiring of Manny Diaz will bring a new level of intensity and defensive scheming into the locker room as the team seeks to restore the identity it created in the early 2000s. On top of this, Miami landed a new starting QB via the transfer portal in Tate Martell from Ohio State. This move should enhance the offense with an instant upgrade in the passing game. The team will receive an unpleasant wake up call Week 1 against Florida, and will likely need a season to develop under the new regime before they take the next step in competing in the ACC.

Picks by Conference



2019 will see some familiar faces sitting atop the ACC and SEC but could see some new teams throw their name in the mix in the remaining conferences. The departure of Ohio State and Oklahoma's Quarterbacks really makes the conversation interesting in the Big 10 and Big 12 more so than in years past. As for the PAC 12, it will be the Wild West both literally and figuratively, as four or potentially more teams have a shot to win the Conference Championship in Santa Clara in December.

ACC: Clemson- The Tigers have won each of the last 4 ACC Championships, and should expect nothing less in 2019 without any true competition that can take them down.

BIG 10: Michigan- In a year filled with change for Ohio State and Penn State, Michigan will finally breakthrough as Big 10 Champs for the first time under Harbaugh.

BIG 12: Texas- After being spoiled with the last 2 Heisman winners, I think Texas will finally be "back" as their talented offense will be too much for OU to handle in a Red River Rematch.

PAC 12: Oregon- This will be the widest open race of all of the Power 5 Conferences, with Washington State, Washington, and Utah all competing for the top spot neck and neck.

SEC: Alabama- Reloading in the offseason with Saban's best recruiting class ever, the Crimson Tide should roll over any team set in their path as in years past.