

COLLEGE FOOTBALL GAME SCOUT
By The Sports Xchange

Game Analysis: Top 25 teams

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Wednesday, August 29, 2018

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--COLLEGE FOOTBALL GAME SCOUT --
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CENTRAL FLORIDA AT CONNECTICUT

GAME SNAPSHOT:

KICKOFF: Thursday, 7 p.m. ET

SITE: Pratt & Whitney Stadium at Rentschler Field, East Hartford, Conn.

TV: ESPNU

SERIES: UCF leads

RANKINGS: UCF No. 21

KEYS TO THE GAME

UCF has some key spots to fill, most notably on defense where linebacker Shaquem Griffin, end Jamiyus Pittman, and cornerback Mike Hughes are among personnel loss, but the No. 21 Knights also have enough power coming back for another run at a New Year's Six bowl appearance and top 10 ranking.

The Knights will be looking to extend their national-leading 13-game winning streak when they open their 2018 campaign Thursday at Connecticut. Kickoff for the nationally televised game (ESPNU) at Pratt and Whitney Stadium at East Hartford's Rentschler Field is 7 p.m. ET.

Quarterback McKenzie Milton, a 1-2 punch at running back in Adrian Killins Jr. and Otis Anderson, and receivers like Drederick Snellson and Otis Anderson return from a unit that led the nation in total offense.

Milton passed for 310 yards a game in powering the Knights to a 13-0 record and American Athletic Conference title, earning Offensive Player of the Year honors in the process. He also was the team's No. 2 rusher with 613 yards.

Milton won't have his top receiver, Tre'Quan Smith, back to throw to, but Snellson caught 45 balls for 695 yards and eight touchdowns and Anderson snagged 30 for another 351 yards.

Milton's dual-threat abilities are a concern for UConn coach Randy Edsall.

"He's another guy who can get back there in the pocket and if things break down, he can take off and run with the ball," Edsall said. "So you can do a really good job covering people and all of a sudden he finds a little seam and he can take off, which makes it tough on a defense."

Edsall's Huskies are coming off a discouraging 3-9 season and will go into the game with as many as eight freshmen slated to see action, six on defense.

"They've got a lot of new personnel on the defense so it will be interesting to see how much they are different schematically," Knights coach Josh Heupel said. "We've got to be ready to adjust on that side of the ball."

Heupel will be making his head coaching debut and acknowledges a myriad of feelings -- excitement, nervousness, anxiousness, and more -- as the game approaches.

"You'll have all those feelings," he said. "You put eight months into something, you should have all those feelings if you care deeply about it. That's the great thing about this game. You work a lot of hours for a very few, limited amount of opportunities -- 12 that are guaranteed."

"I'm excited to get out there and compete with our players."

Edsall could be starting as many as six true or redshirt freshmen and up to five sophomores on defense against the UCF offensive juggernaut.

"Being a young team that we are, the big thing for us is that we allow them to go out there and play as fast as they can and there's not too much thinking going on and for everybody to go out and execute as best as they can and as quick as they can," Edsall said. "Defensively we're going to be a work in progress as we continue to move through the season."

Two freshmen, including running back Zavier Scott, could start on offense, but the leader is senior quarterback David Pindell. Pindell passed for 937 yards in seven games (four starts) last year. Senior Hergy Mayala, who led the Huskies with 43 catches for 615 yards and seven scores, is back.

"Their wideouts are all back, a lot of veteran guys up front," Heupel said of UConn's offense. "They have a lot of pieces coming back and will pose some threats on the outside as well."

After the opener, UCF will entertain South Carolina State at home Sept. 8, but the Huskies will face their second ranked opponent when they travel to No. 22 Boise State the same day

PLAYERS TO WATCH**Knights**

--QB McKenzie Milton has to be eagerly looking forward to going against the young UConn defense. He passed for 4,037 yards, completing 7.1 percent of his attempts, and rushed for 613 last year while accounting for 45 touchdowns (37 passing). He is looking forward to getting started. "Any time you step on the field playing on national TV and a conference game it's always important," he said.

--WR Dredrick Snelson was UCF's No. 2 receiver behind the departed Tre'Quan Smith last year. He had 46 catches for 695 yards, a 15.1 per reception average, with eight touchdowns. He will be operating against a freshman-sophomore dominant UConn secondary.

--LB Pat Jasinski may not have gotten the recognition that went to Shaquem Griffin much of the year, but he actually was the leading tackler for UCF. He had 105 total tackles with 8.0 for losses (1.0 sack) and also came up with an interception.

--CB Nevelle Clarke started five of seven appearances in 2017 after serving a six-game suspension for violation of NCAA-mandated drug tests. He was credited with 25 tackles, an interception and four pass breakups in his limited time.

Huskies

--QB David Pindell started four of seven appearances for the Huskies last year, passing for 937 yards. He threw two of his four touchdown passes in the 49-24 loss to UCF, accounting for 297 yards of total offense (201 passing) in the loss.

--WR Hergy Mayala led the Huskies in receiving last year and gives them the best chance of breaking off a big play against the Knights' defense. Mayala had 43 receptions for 615 yards in 10 appearances, all starts. He record three games with 100 yards in receptions.

--LB Eli Thomas is the one of two non-sophomore or freshman listed No. 1 on the defensive depth chart entering the game. He spent the 2017 season rehabbing from a knee injury.

WESTERN KENTUCKY AT WISCONSIN**GAME SNAPSHOT****KICKOFF:** Friday, 7 p.m. ET**SITE:** Camp Randall Stadium, Madison, Wis.**TV:** ESPN**SERIES:** Wisconsin leads 1-0, winning 24-6 in 2001.**RANKINGS:** Wisconsin No. 4**KEYS TO THE GAME**

Western Kentucky coach Mike Sanford Jr. said he isn't expecting any surprises on offense from No. 4 Wisconsin in the season opener for both teams at Camp Randall Stadium on Friday night.

Wisconsin needs no surprises.

Not only do the Badgers return quarterback Alex Hornibrook and all five starters on their offensive line, but sophomore running back Jonathan Taylor starts the season as a top candidate for the Heisman Trophy.

"Our running back and the run game have always had a lot of focus put on it by opponents," Wisconsin coach Paul Chryst said. "That hasn't changed. If you're going to play us, you know that we're going to run the football, and we'll always get a lot of attention out of that."

Taylor, who earned All-American honors as a true freshman, rushed for 1,977 yards and 13 touchdowns last season, finishing sixth in Heisman voting.

"We know that their calling card is always going to be to run the football, so we've got to prepare to tackle Taylor with 11 guys," Sanford told the Bowling Green Daily News. "We've got to swarm to the football."

"Their two tackles might be the best in college football and to return their core three inside -- those three are really, really good."

Three of five offensive linemen earned All-America honors last season -- redshirt seniors Michael Deiter (left guard) and Beau Benzschawel (right guard), and redshirt junior David Edwards (right tackle). Deiter played at left tackle in 2017, but junior Jon Dietzen likely takes over there. Sophomore center Tyler Biadasz is a rising star.

They'll be tasked to protect Hornibrook, a junior who threw for 2,644 yards and 25 touchdowns to lead Wisconsin to a 13-1 record in 2017. He was intercepted 14 times, and cleaning that up is an area of focus for this season.

One potential problem for the opener is the absence of Wisconsin's top two receivers.

Junior wide receiver Quintez Cephus has been suspended indefinitely and faces two charges of sexual assault, stemming from an April 22 incident at his apartment. Cephus faces one felony charge of second-degree sexual assault of an intoxicated victim and a second felony charge of third-degree sexual assault.

Sophomore wideout Danny Davis, who is Cephus' roommate and was at the apartment during the incident, was suspended for two games by Chryst.

The pair combined for 60 catches, 919 yards and 11 touchdowns during the 2017 season. Cephus broke his right leg on Nov. 4, had surgery and missed the final five games of the season.

"Even without the two wide receivers, Davis and Cephus ... it's a loss for them, but the next guys up they'll be able to get down the field as well," Sanford said.

Wisconsin's defense also presents serious challenges, led by senior safety D'Cota Dixon, a third-year starter, and senior inside linebacker T.J. Edwards, a 2017 All-American and a four-year starter.

Badgers senior nose tackle Olive Sagapolu, a formidable player known for his athleticism at 6-foot-2 and 342 pounds, typically drew double teams last season.

The Badgers finished second nationally in total defense (262.1 yards per game) and ranked third in scoring defense (13.9 points per game) and rushing defense (98.4 ypg).

Although Western Kentucky posted a 6-7 overall record in 2017 during Sanford's first season at the helm, Chryst said he respects the team, which finished 4-4 in Conference USA last season.

"They play extremely hard and (we) know a lot of those coaches," Chryst said. "We have a ton of respect for those coaches. When we show the tape to our players, they see good football players. It's a good team."

Last week in practice, the Hilltoppers worked on third-down simulations and piped in loud music and crowd noise to mimic what to expect at Camp Randall. Communication among quarterbacks and the O-line also was a focus.

Hilltoppers redshirt senior Drew Eckels and redshirt freshman Davis Shanley will vie for playing time at quarterback, with the departure of standout Mike White. Eckels has played in 16 career games at Western Kentucky.

"Both those guys will tell us what they love both in the pass game and the run game, and I'm looking forward to watching them play," Sanford said.

Redshirt senior defensive back DeAndre Farris is one player the Badgers will need to keep an eye on. Farris, a Conference USA honorable mention player in 2017, had 14 pass breakups as a junior, and recorded 54 tackles (39 solo, 15 assists).

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Hilltoppers

--TE Mik'Quan Deane, a redshirt freshman, had 11 receptions for 143 yards and one touchdown last season. The senior, a former junior college transfer, had a career-high five catches at Vanderbilt.

--LB Ben Holt is one of two team captains, as voted on by the team, the other captain being senior DB DeAndre Farris. Holt, a junior, is following in the footsteps of his older brother, Nick, who was a 2015 team captain when both were on the team playing for their father, Nick Holt, who was WKU's defensive coordinator and linebackers coach from 2013-16. Ben Holt began his Hilltoppers career as a walk-on. He made 34 tackles last season.

--RB Marquez Trigg is one of five running backs connected by "OR" on the depth chart, although he is listed first, ahead of D'Andre Ferby, who led the team with only 373 rushing yards (3.2 per carry). Trigg carries 51 times for 167 yards (3.3 per carry), as WKU ranked last nationally with 60.8 yards per game on the ground. It won't be easy finding room against a physical Wisconsin front seven.

Badgers

--QB Alex Hornibrook is finally an upperclassmen. Since taking over the quarterback duties early in his freshman season, Hornibrook has been a steady presence. His consistent play helped an offense adjust to starting a freshman running back and overcoming injuries at wide receiver last season. Hornibrook's development should take another step in his junior season, especially after throwing 15 interceptions last season.

--WR A.J. Taylor steps into a bigger role following the suspensions of top wide receivers Danny Davis and Quintez Cephus. Taylor can gain confident early in the season against Wisconsin's easy schedule, particularly the opener against Western Kentucky. Building a rapport with Hornibrook is essential to ease the pressure of teams stacking the line to stop Taylor.

--LB T.J. Edwards was named a preseason All-American. A key player since his freshman season, Edwards has tallied 39 career starts to earn the distinction as the most experienced defensive returnee. He is rated No. 65 on NFLDraftScout.com's initial prospect ranking of the season.

UTAH STATE AT MICHIGAN STATE**GAME SNAPSHOT****KICKOFF:** Friday, 7 p.m. ET**SITE:** Spartan Stadium, East Lansing, Mich.**TV:** Big Ten Network**SERIES:** First meeting**RANKINGS:** Michigan State No. 11**KEYS TO THE GAME**

Never underestimate coach Mark Dantonio and the Michigan State football program.

That message was delivered loud and clear last season. After a 3-9 campaign in 2016 and a tumultuous offseason, the Spartans were lightly regarding heading into last season. There was even talk that Dantonio might be on the hot seat.

All the Spartans did was finish 10-3, including victories over rival Michigan and Penn State, capped with a 42-17 thumping of Washington State in the Holiday Bowl.

With a return to prominence, the Spartans begin their 2018 season with lofty expectations. They open the season against Utah State at home on Friday with the No. 11 ranking and Big Ten championship aspirations. The two programs will be squaring off for the first time.

Dantonio's teams have traditionally been built around defense, but the Spartans should also be dynamic on offense. They have one of the conference's, if not the nation's, top quarterbacks in Brian Lewerke and a premier running back in LJ Scott.

Lewerke, a junior, threw for 20 touchdowns last season and completed 59 percent of his passes while getting picked off just seven times. He was also second on the team with 559 rushing yards and five more touchdowns.

Scott gained 898 yards on 201 carries (4.5 average) and scored eight touchdowns.

"I feel like we're a good enough offense to put a lot of points up, hopefully," Lewerke told the Detroit Free Press. "I know the offense like the back of my hand now. I can focus a lot more on what the defense is giving me. I trust all my guys to run all the right stuff."

"I can just be more calm and not think, 'Ah, man, I forgot what this guy is running, I've got to figure it out as he's running it.' It's more just be calm and have fun."

Overall, the Spartans return 19 position starters, tied for most in the nation, and 48 letterwinners.

That includes the team's top four tacklers, led by junior linebacker Joe Bachie, who racked up 100 last season along with 3.5 sacks and three interceptions.

Safety Khari Willis, a tri-captain along with Bachie and Lewerke, spearheads the secondary. The Spartans ranked second in rushing defense nationally and could be just as stingy this season with nine returning starters.

"We had a good camp," Bachie told the Detroit News. "Guys got through it healthy so that's a great thing. We have a bunch of smart players on defense, which helps a defense. Talking and being confident, that makes a good defense."

The Aggies hope to put up more resistance against a Big Ten team than they did last season, when they opened with a 59-10 loss at Wisconsin. They are 1-14 all time against Big Ten opponents.

Utah State finished at 6-7 after losing to New Mexico State 26-20 in the Arizona Bowl.

Experience will also be an asset for the Aggies this season. They have 18 starters back, nine on each side of the ball.

Sophomore quarterback Jordan Love appeared in 12 games as a redshirt freshman and started the last six. He completed 54.9 percent of his passes, including eight touchdowns, while getting picked off six times. His top target, senior Ron'quavion Tarver, hauled in seven touchdowns a year ago.

"He is going to be a better quarterback and the better people will play around him," coach Matt Wells said. "We've added some better wideouts around him. There is more talent and he has got an experienced offensive line, and that always gives a quarterback a sense of comfort and peace a little bit."

Senior linebacker Suli Tamaivena (team-high 111 tackles) tops a defensive unit that has eight of its top nine tacklers back.

"We're deeper in the front seven than we've been, even though we kind of leave camp right now a little banged up at linebacker," Wells said. "I think they're playing fast and with a lot of confidence right now."

Utah State will be playing in the state of Michigan for just the second time. Its last visit was in 1961 when it defeated Western Michigan 65-22 in Kalamazoo.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Aggies

--WR Ron'quavion Tarver can be a dominant player, and he has nice size at wideout at 6-foot-3 and 215 pounds. Combined with 5-foot-8 WR Jordan Nathan in the slot (where he produced several chunk plays last season as a true freshman) and tight end Dax Raymond, the Utah State passing game has legit options. Another to watch is WR Savon Scarver, who had receptions of 35, 36, 40 and 70 yards as a true freshman last season and is a dangerous kick returner. Tarver led the way for the Aggies last season with 48 receptions for 569 yards and seven TDs.

--PK Dominik Eberle is a name to know if the game is close. The junior made 18 of 24 field goal attempts last season, including a career-best 52-yarder, as he was one of three finalists for the Lou Groza Award, given to the nation's top kicker. According to Utah State, other than Merlin Olsen winning the 1961 Outland Trophy, that marked the first time a Utah State player had been a finalist for a national award.

--LB Tipa Galeai, who had 5.5 tackles for loss in 2016 at TCU, is expected to start at an outside linebacker position in Utah State's 3-4 base. Utah State coach Matt Wells also added another transfer from a Big 12 school, 285-pound Fua Leilua, slated to start at defensive end.

Spartans

--QB Brian Lewerke spent the offseason working on becoming a more accurate passer after connecting for 59 percent last season as a sophomore. He'll have the benefit of throwing to a trio of receivers that caught 140 passes last season, led by senior Felton Davis (55 catches) and junior Darrell Stewart (50). Lewerke showed last season that he can make plays with his feet, running for 559 yards and five touchdowns, but for the Spartans to compete for the Big Ten East title, he'll need to become more of a consistent passer.

--RB LJ Scott has led Michigan State in rushing in each of his first three seasons and surprised many when he decided to return for his senior season. He did so because he said he felt he needed to get much better, and the opener offers him the chance to prove he can finally become a 1,000-yard back, the one the Spartans expected when he arrived as a four-star recruit. He's had flashes of greatness in his career, but now as the unquestioned No. 1 back, Scott will have the chance to prove he's one of the top backs in the Big Ten.

SAN DIEGO STATE AT STANFORD**GAME SNAPSHOT****KICKOFF:** Friday, 9 p.m. ET**SITE:** Stanford Stadium, Stanford, Calif.**TV:** FS1**SERIES:****RANKINGS:** Stanford, No. 13**KEYS TO THE GAME**

To say Stanford fans are feeling the love for their 13th-ranked Cardinal would be an understatement.

Coming off a somewhat disappointing 2017 when they went 9-5, the Cardinal are flying sky-high heading into 2018 thanks to their senior running back and Heisman Trophy candidate Bryce Love.

Love decided to come back to Palo Alto for his final year after finishing second to Oklahoma's Baker Mayfield in last year's Heisman voting. He was the Doak Walker Award winner, Pac-12 Offensive Player of the Year and Lombardi Award winner.

And now he kicks off his senior season Friday night when the defending Pac-12 North champion Cardinal welcome San Diego State of the Mountain West to Stanford Stadium.

Each team has been to a bowl game in the past eight seasons and each team boasts a powerful running game.

The Aztecs must replace Rashaad Penny, who in 2017 led college football with 2,248 rushing yards to go along with 23 rushing TDs. San Diego State veteran coach Rocky Long is confident he has his man in Juwan Washington.

"One thing I learned from (Long), is no game is bigger than the other," Washington told the Daily Aztec. "Everyone's going to hype up the first game, but in my eyes it's just another game. We've just got to go out there and win."

For the Cardinal, Love is the focal point of a versatile and high-powered Stanford offense.

Love accumulated 2,118 rushing yards to go along with 19 TDs to lead a Cardinal offense that averaged 32.4 points and 388.6 total yards. Expect the offense to be just as prolific, but don't expect Love to top last year's stats.

"Preparing for this season, I've had a lot of experience with this," coach David Shaw said as he talked about superstars forgoing the NFL to return to Palo Alto. "First, there was Andrew Luck. And with Christian McCaffery coming back from his All-American sophomore year for his junior year. I told Bryce, this year can't be about stats. It's about getting bigger, stronger and being more versatile.

"We're not going to do the Bryce Love stat watch."

Love bulked up about 10 pounds in the offseason and has become a "markedly better pass blocker," Shaw said while hinting Love might be used more as a receiver out of the backfield this season.

"While we want to feature one of the best players in college football, we don't want to wear him out," Shaw told the San Francisco Chronicle.

While Love gets the national attention, Washington has toiled as a backup the past two seasons to two 2,000-yard rushers, Donnell Pumphrey in 2016 and Penny in 2017. Now he gets his chance to continue the Aztecs' streak of 2,000-yard rushers.

Washington, who flashed star potential as Penny's backup in 2017, carried the ball 127 times for 759 yards and scored seven touchdowns. Long also will have Washington return kickoffs and punts.

"You use your best players as much and as effectively as you can," Long told the San Diego Union-Tribune. "He's by far our best kickoff return guy, and that's a big momentum shift in the game. So I don't see us taking him away from that."

With an offensive line that returns five starters, Long is expecting great things from Washington.

"All you have to do is look at what (Washington's) done the last couple of years as the backup," Long told the Daily Aztec. "I don't see -- if our offensive line plays well, which we expect them to do -- I don't see a real drop-off there."

San Diego State also has the luxury of having a veteran quarterback calling the signals. Senior Christian Chapman's numbers might not jump off the page, but he completed 60.1 percent of his passes in 2017 for 13 touchdowns with only four interceptions.

Stanford quarterback K.J. Costello also returns and is firmly entrenched as the starter. Costello took over the starting job midway through 2017 and completed 58.8 percent of his passes for 1,573 total yards. He recorded 14 touchdown passes to go along with four interceptions.

Costello was on the sideline last season when Chapman completed an 8-yard pass to tight end David Wells with less than a minute remaining to give the unranked Aztecs a 20-17 home win over the No. 19 Cardinal.

The Cardinal return 18 starters, and many remember the home fans swarming the fields. Shaw certainly remembers and Stanford faithful can be sure the Cardinal will be prepared.

"I hope we didn't take them lightly, but I didn't do a good job of getting us ready to play a very good, very physical football team that not only runs the ball but has a quarterback that can get out of the pocket and do a bunch of different things," Shaw said after the loss last season.

The Cardinal on Monday announced that two starters, center Jesse Burkett and cornerback Alijah Holder, will be held out of the game because of injuries.

San Diego State was picked to finish second behind Fresno State in the West Division of the Mountain West in a preseason media poll.

Stanford was picked to finish second in the North Division of the Pac-12 behind Washington.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Aztecs

--RB Juwan Washington should be the next big thing for San Diego State, following Donnel Pumphrey, who rushed for 2,133 yards in 2016, and Rashaad Penny, who ran for a program-record 2,248 last season, the fifth-highest total in FBS history. Washington -- who is more comparable in stature to Pumphrey -- rushed for 759 yards (6.0 per carry) as a backup last season. He should excel in San Diego State's power run game.

--QB Christian Chapman is entering his third season as the starter. He experienced slight regressions from 2016 to 2017 in completion percentage (61.0 to 60.1), yards per attempt (7.9 to 7.7) and touchdowns (20 to 13). San Diego State is 23-6 when he is the starting quarterback.

--S Tariq Thompson flourished as a freshman last season in coach Rocky Long's 3-3-5 stack defense, picking off five passes. He also made 63 tackles, broke up four passes and forced a fumble.

Cardinal

--RB Bryce Love made the physically risky and increasingly rare decision to play a fourth and final campaign as a college running back. Love, who wasn't healthy for most of last season, still surpassed 2,000 rushing yards. Love sits at fifth on Stanford's career rushing charts at 3,123 yards -- 1,177 behind leader Stepfan Taylor. Love's predecessor Christian McCaffrey is third at 3,922. Last year against San Diego State, Love dominated with 184 yards and two touchdowns.

--LB Bobby Okereke is a senior who led the linebacker corps with 88 tackles in 2017. No. 1 was defensive lineman Harrison Phillips (98) and safety Justin Reid (94 tackles), both of whom were taken in the third round of the NFL Draft. Okereke also had four sacks and an interception, and will need to morph into stardom to help make up for the absence of Phillips, Reid and cornerback Quenton Meeks.

LOUISVILLE VS. ALABAMA**GAME SNAPSHOT:****KICKOFF:** Saturday, 8:14 p.m. ET**SITE:** Camping World Stadium, Orlando, Fla.**TV:** ABC**SERIES:** Alabama leads 2-1. Alabama lost the last meeting 34-7 in 1991 Fiesta Bowl.**RANKINGS:** Alabama No. 1**KEYS TO THE GAME**

The lingering quarterback controversy that has engulfed Alabama's program since Tua Tagovailoa replaced Jalen Hurts and rallied the Crimson Tide to the national championship last January may finally see some resolution Saturday when the top-ranked Tide hosts unranked Louisville.

Or will it?

Bama coach Nick Saban continued to be evasive with the approach of the 8:14 kickoff in Tuscaloosa's Bryant-Denny Stadium, separating Tagovailoa and Hurts with the critical word "or" at the No. 1 quarterback spot on the depth chart for the nationally televised (ABC) affair.

"I don't think you should assume anything," said Saban, who has the Tide going for back-to-back national titles and its sixth championship since 2009.

Chances are both quarterbacks will play and could potentially even be on the field at the same time. Saban has kept things close to the vest all offseason, only suggesting that one quarterback has to win over the team. Their teammates have been tight-lipped as well.

"We've been having to prepare for both of them," Louisville coach Bobby Petrino said.

"They both can run, and they're both big 220-pound guys that can run with big hips that are hard to tackle, so the thing we have to do is get in position to make the tackles when they do run and do a great job of form tackling and getting extra guys to the ball.

"They're very sound on everything that they do -- protection, run game, their RPO game that they do. We've got to be able to recognize splits and formations and tips and try to have an idea what's coming before the ball's snapped."

Otherwise, it appears to be a pretty typical Alabama team, with lots of talent and high expectations. The Crimson Tide is the only program to participate in all four seasons of the College Football Playoff.

Yet it's a very different team from 2017 in terms of personnel, especially defensively. Overall, there are at least 14 new starters and numerous new young players in key supportive roles, and the coaching staff has undergone major changes, too. There are six new assistant coaches, along with promotions for Mike Locksley and Tosh Lupoi to offensive and defensive coordinator, respectively.

"Great tradition, very well-coached team, with a lot of really good players," Petrino said.

The unranked Cardinals are coming off an 8-5 season, including a 31-27 loss to Mississippi State in the TaxSlayer Bowl.

On defense, Louisville only has five returning starters, including sophomore linebacker Dorian Etheridge, who notched 83 tackles in 13 games. Junior defensive end Jonathan Greenard was credited with 15.5 tackles for loss and 7.5 sacks.

"Louisville, to me, has an outstanding team," Saban said. "Very, very good offensive coach. They averaged over 38 points per game in the ACC last year, which is a pretty good conference. They have a lot of returning players back from a year ago."

Quarterbacks is one of the spots where the Cardinals have a new starter.

Redshirt sophomore Jawon Pass appeared in five games last season in relief of 2016 Heisman Trophy winner Lamar Jackson. He completed 22 of 33 attempts for 238 yards and two touchdowns, and also ran for 62 yards and a touchdown.

The Cardinals have seven offensive starters back, including wide receiver Jaylen Smith, who caught 60 passes for 980 yards and seven touchdowns in 2017. The offensive line also has four returning starters: offensive tackle Mekhi Becton, guards Lukayus McNeil and Kenny Thomas, and center Robbie Bell.

They key, though, is Petrino, who is known for his offensive prowess. He matches wits with a Crimson Tide defense that has new starters across the board in the secondary. They are going to be tested -- a lot.

"That is definitely a challenge for us," Saban said. "Not only the quarterback, the skill players that they have, the balance they have on offense and the way they were able to run the ball a year ago, as well as throw it effectively, score points against just about everybody they played against."

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Cardinals

--QB Jawon Pass is the player tasked with filling the shoes of Heisman Trophy winner Lamar Jackson, no easy task. Pass is not nearly the runner that Jackson was, but, then again, who is? Jackson set yardage records for all of NCAA football history with his ability to run and pass so effectively. What Pass lacks in Jackson's speed and shiftiness, he is hoping to make up for in his ability to distribute the ball effectively and run Petrino's full offense.

--WR Jaylen Smith is Louisville's top offensive threat. He had an emergency appendectomy on the same day Louisville reported for fall camp and missed two full weeks of workouts, but has been rounding back into shape and will be ready for the opener. Smith, a big, physical threat at 6-foot-4, 225-pounds, was named preseason All-ACC, Louisville's only entry on the preseason All-Conference team.

--OT Linwood Foy is the likely starter at one of Louisville's tackle spots, taking over for Geron Christian, Louisville's junior offensive tackle who entered the NFL Draft as a junior last Spring and was selected in the third round by the Washington Redskins. Foy has not seen major action and will be facing the toughest test of his career against Alabama.

Crimson Tide

--QB Jalen Hurts is 26-2 as a starter but that doesn't guarantee him anything moving forward. The junior was third in the SEC in total offensive yards (2,936) last season, when he ranked 20th in the nation in passing efficiency with a 150.7 rating. He was the 2016 SEC Offensive Player of the Year as a freshman.

--QB Tua Tagovailoa was the MVP of the National Championship Game, when he fired the game-winning touchdown pass in overtime, but a hand injury in the spring prevented him from taking control of the position, as many thought he might. His passing ability, combined with his athleticism, might eventually make him the choice over Hurts, but it seems as if coach Nick Saban very much wants this competition to play out on the field.

FURMAN AT CLEMSON**GAME SNAPSHOT:****KICKOFF:** Saturday, 12:20 p.m. ET**SITE:** Memorial Stadium, Clemson, S.C.**TV:** ACC Network**SERIES:** Clemson leads the series 42-10-4. The Tigers won the last meeting 42-7 in 2012.**RANKINGS:** Clemson No. 2**KEYS TO THE GAME**

Furman coach Clay Hendrix is well aware of the task his FCS Paladins face when they go against a Clemson defense that returns eight starters, especially in the four defenders who comprise the Tigers' formidable foursome up front.

Hendrix has attempted to simplify things when his Paladins meeting the No. 2 Tigers Saturday at Clemson's Memorial Stadium. Kickoff for the ACC Network game is 12:20 p.m. ET.

Hendrix's young offensive line will be going against Clemson tackles Christian Wilkins and Dexter Lawrence and ends Clelin Ferrell and Austin Bryant, who represent the entire preseason All-Atlantic Coast Conference defensive line.

"I've told those kids already, 'Look, we're only going to ask you to block one of them,' " Hendrix said of the instructions for his team. "It's just a matter of getting your job done.

"But I think the toughest part is collectively -- one or two guys winning is one thing, but trying to get five guys to win at the same time? That's probably the biggest task."

"Winning" against Clemson's defense has proven to be a daunting task for the majority of Clemson's opponents in recent years, let alone a Football Championship Subdivision team from a private liberal arts school in nearby Greenville, S.C., with an enrollment of less than 3,000.

The Tigers ranked second nationally in scoring defense (13.6 points per game) and fourth in total defense (276.7 yards) last season, helping the program to a 12-2 record and a third consecutive College Football Playoff appearance.

Although Furman has won 10 games in the series, the Paladins' last victory came in 1936 -- during Franklin D. Roosevelt's first term as president. Clemson has won 30 consecutive games in the series since and has never lost to a Southern Conference opponent since leaving to join the ACC in 1953, going 44-0 against the league.

Furman, the 1988 Division I-AA national champion, recaptured some of its past glory last season under Hendrix -- a former offensive lineman for the Paladins -- by winning seven straight games and qualifying for the FCS playoffs, finishing with an 8-5 record.

"They were one of the most improved teams in the country last year," Clemson coach Dabo Swinney said. "They had a heck of a run into the playoffs and got better and better.

"They have 10 or 11 starters back that are juniors or seniors and offensively, to be quite honest with you, it is stressful to watch them. They do a great job schematically with all the shifts and motions and option principles."

As an interesting side note, Furman quarterback Harris Roberts also is a Clemson student; he is enrolled in a joint engineering program that began with three years at Furman and is on track to complete his dual-program degree next May at Clemson.

"What a neat story that is," Swinney said. "That's pretty cool. I guess he can't lose."

While defense is expected to be Clemson's calling card this season, the Tigers' offense has prolific potential as well. Quarterback Kelly Bryant, who staved off a stiff challenge from highly regarded freshman Trevor Lawrence to retain his job, accounted for 3,467 yards and 24 touchdowns last season.

He will be flanked by a talented receiving corps that "has more depth than we've ever had," according to Swinney, and a stable of running backs led by sophomore Travis Etienne, who's coming a freshman season that saw him lead the team with 766 yards and 13 touchdowns.

Etienne averaged 7.2 yards per carry as a rookie, the fourth-best rushing average in school history and the most by a Clemson freshman since C.J. Spiller in 2006.

Etienne will be backed up by Adam Choice, a fifth-year player who had the best fall camp of his career, junior Tavien Feaster, who rushed for 669 yards in 2017, and J-Lin Dixon, a freshman who had the coaching staff raving in fall camp.

Despite being a heavy underdog, Hendrix has repeatedly told his team to relish the moment.

"It's a unique opportunity, just take advantage of it," he said. "All you can do is go prepare as best you can, and at the end of the day you'd better rely on what insight and wisdom you've gathered because it's not just going to show up that day."

PLAYERS TO WATCH**Paladins**

--QB Harris Roberts saw action in 13 games last season as a backup to All-Southern Conference QB P.J. Blazejowski. He tried only 13 passes, completing nine, and rushed five times for 71 yards in his most extensive playing time in three seasons.

--WR Thomas Gordon was one of two preseason all-SoCon picks in the passing game (TE Jake Walker) after leading the Paladins in receiving with 39 catches last season. They were good for 717 yards and a touchdown.

--DE Chinedu Okonya will lead the pass rush for the Paladins. He led the team in sacks last year with 4.5. A senior, he has 7.5 sacks in his career.

--CB Amir Trapp spent the last three years at Clemson, where he played in 10 games last season, before leaving for Furman as a graduate transfer. He is slated to start at left corner for the Paladins. Trapp is the son of former Clemson star James Trapp (1989-92), who played 11 years in the NFL and won a Super Bowl championship while with the Baltimore Ravens at the end of the 2000 season.

Tigers

--QB Trevor Lawrence will make his highly anticipated college debut against Furman. The Tigers' quarterback of the future, Lawrence is a freshman who flashed his potential throughout spring drills and fall camp and is expected to get playing time early despite being No. 2 behind Kelly Bryant. "The game has slowed down for him," coach Dabo Swinney said of Lawrence. "Trevor has earned the opportunity to play and compete."

--RB Travis Etienne will get his first start after amassing a team-leading 766 yards and 13 touchdowns in his freshman campaign in 2017. He was one of the nation's most explosive backs last season, averaging 7.2 yards per carry, and will be eager to make another solid first impression in his first game in a feature role.

--WR Justyn Ross is just a freshman, but he has looked like a veteran in fall camp. A 6-foot-4, 210-pounder with a knack for high-pointing the ball and making challenging receptions look easy. Coaches have raved about his size and agility, and he's certain to get a good look against what should be an outmanned Furman secondary.

AUSTIN PEAY AT GEORGIA**GAME SNAPSHOT:****KICKOFF:** Saturday, 3:30 p.m. ET**SITE:** Sanford Stadium, Athens, Ga.**TV:** ESPN**SERIES:** First meeting**RANKINGS:** Georgia No. 3**KEYS TO THE GAME**

The game looks to be a prospective mismatch when Georgia hosts Austin Peay in its season opener, but that doesn't mean the Bulldogs aren't anxious to get their season underway Saturday.

Kickoff at Sanford Stadium in Athens is 3:30 p.m. ET (ESPN).

"I know our players are chomping at the bit to get the chance to go play somebody other than ourselves," Georgia coach Kirby Smart said. "They have practiced long and hard, and they're excited about the opportunity to go get ready for somebody else."

There's been plenty of buildup for Georgia and the impending 2018 campaign.

Ranked No. 3 nationally after winning the SEC and the Rose Bowl before falling to Alabama in the national championship game, expectations are once again high for the Bulldogs. Many prognosticators are projecting them to challenge for a trip to the playoffs for the second straight year.

Smart and his coaches have done everything possible to ensure that complacency doesn't set in. That includes making sure players understand that starting positions are never guaranteed -- no matter your previous status on the team.

"I think it's just kind of the mantra we go by here, that every practice is really competitive, and every job opportunity is competitive. I mean, Andrew Thomas could have every right to left tackle there is, but if he doesn't play as well as the next guy, then he's not going to be the starter," Smart said. "Deandre Baker through this camp, he's actually practiced better this year than he did last year, but there were points in this camp where if he didn't play better than Eric Stokes, then he wasn't going to be the starter. So as far as that goes, for us it's always that way."

"Guys compete; guys go out and play. It was the same way last year with Jake (Fromm) and (former quarterback) Jacob (Eason). He was out there competing."

The visiting Governors of the Ohio Valley Conference are an FCS team on the rise.

Coming off a season that saw the program win eight games for the first time since 1987, Austin Peay enters the contest ranked 23rd in the AFCA under head coach Will Healy.

He understands the challenge his Governors are facing.

"They're loaded, they're well-coached, they play really hard. I'm familiar enough with the University of Georgia where I don't know if I've felt the same buzz around Georgia as I feel right now. I know the place will be rocking. ... For me, I know Austin Peay's relevant right now because we're playing the University of Georgia," Healy said. "That's big for our kids. We're going to get one chance on September 1 to line it up against arguably the best team in the country."

The Governors are led by sophomore quarterback Jeremiah Oatsvall, a native of Brentwood, Tenn., who is the 2018 OVC Preseason Player of the Year.

Of course, Georgia has a pretty good quarterback itself.

Jake Fromm is primed for another big year after a sensational freshman campaign that saw him complete 181 of 291 passes for 2,615 yards and 24 touchdowns. He takes over as the focal point for a Bulldogs offense that has to replace the running back duo of Sony Michel and Nick Chubb.

"I'm very pleased with what he's done for our team from a stand-in-front-of-the-group, command the respect, grow us a player, picking the right plays to put in. He's done a really good job of that," Smart said. "We want that for every player on our team. We want every guy on our team to lead by example and do things the right way. And Jake's done that since he's been here."

PLAYERS TO WATCH**Governors**

--QB Jeremiah Oatsvall was the Ohio Valley Conference Freshman of the Year for 2017 after passing for 1,148 yards and rushing for 453. He doesn't back away from big games. He passed for a career-high 209 yards against a UCF team that finished 2017 undefeated.

--WR D.J. Montgomery is Austin Peay's leading returning receiver after second on the team last year. He caught 19 passes for 228 yards and tied for the team lead in touchdown receptions with two.

--DE Jaison Williams, a junior from Trussville, Georgia, is a unanimous pick for pre-season all-America honors. He finished second in the OVC in sacks with 9.5 in 2017 and had 11.5 tackles for loss among his 44 stops. He has 13 career sacks.

--LB Gunnar Scholado has been recognized for pre-season all-America honors by several sources after finishing last year with 99 tackles, including 12 for losses. Both numbers were team highs and helped earn him first-team all-OVC recognition.

Bulldogs

--RB D'Andre Swift takes over as the main man in the backfield following the graduation of Nick Chubb and Sony Michel. The sophomore won't have to go it alone as junior Elijah Holyfield -- boxer Evander's son -- will help to shoulder the load but Swift, who averaged almost eight yards per carry as a freshman, figures to be the best big-play threat for the Bulldogs at the position.

--LB D'Andre Walker will receive his first opportunity at starting for the Bulldogs following the graduation of Lorenzo Carter and Davin Bellamy. Much is expected. Despite being more of a situational player for the Bulldogs, the senior finished second on the team in sacks with 5.5 for losses of 48 yards. He also finished with 13.5 tackles for losses of 65 yards, second on the team to Roquan Smith.

OREGON STATE AT OHIO STATE**GAME SNAPSHOT****KICKOFF:** Saturday, noon ET**SITE:** Ohio Stadium, Columbus, Ohio**TV:** ABC**SERIES:** Ohio State leads 2-0**RANKINGS:** Ohio State No. 5**KEYS TO THE GAME**

After a tumultuous summer that culminated in the head coach being suspended for three games, fifth-ranked Ohio State hopes to find some relief on Saturday when Oregon State visits Ohio Stadium in the season opener for both teams.

Ryan Day grabbed hold of the reins as acting head coach while Urban Meyer serves a university-imposed suspension in the fallout from the alleged domestic dispute between fired assistant coach Zach Smith and his ex-wife Courtney.

The 39-year-old Day, who came to Ohio State last year as quarterbacks coach and co-offensive coordinator, is leaning heavily on associate head coach and defensive coordinator Greg Schiano and co-offensive coordinator Kevin Wilson for help.

Schiano and Wilson are former college head coaches, but they were passed over for the interim job given to Day, an assistant with no head coaching experience.

"It's all been about the support and how do we get through this thing together," Day said. "Because there were times along the way we didn't know what tomorrow was going to bring. So it was all about what can we do for the team, how can we get this thing moving forward to have a successful season, because at the end of the day we need to put a good product out on the field on Saturday and so that's what the focus has been."

At a Monday news conference, Day's first in his temporary role, he seized the day with his coolness and demeanor. He mostly avoided speaking about Meyer, saying he wasn't interviewed as part of the investigation, and focused on football-related questions.

"The plan to win has never changed," Day said. "So that's the culture here and the plan to win is always to be here at Ohio State."

Facing Oregon State in the opener should help Day ease into his dual role of being head coach and an offensive coordinator who continues to call the plays. The Beavers finished 1-11 last year, with their lone victory over an FCS program.

Oregon State is coached by Jonathan Smith, who was hired in November to replace Gary Andersen. He returned to his alma mater after most recently working as the offensive coordinator at Washington.

"Jonathan comes over and obviously has had a great career and he's going to come in with a lot of energy," Day said.

Ohio State comes into the season with Big Ten and national championship aspirations based on a deep, talented and veteran roster.

The Buckeyes return two 1,000-yard rushers with running backs J.K. Dobbins and Mike Weber, seven wide receivers with 17 or more catches in 2017, and a slightly reconstituted offensive line that includes two-year starting guard Michael Jordan moving to center to replace first-round draft pick Billy Price.

The obvious newcomer is strong-armed sophomore quarterback Dwayne Haskins Jr., who replaces four-year starter J.T. Barrett. Haskins led the comeback last year at Michigan when Barrett went down with an injury and then won the job last spring in a battle with Joe Burrow, who transferred to LSU and will start there.

Sophomore Tate Martell, also part of the quarterback competition, will see playing time in Saturday's game, Day said.

The strength of Ohio State's defense resides up front, led by preseason All-American Nick Bosa and Chase Young on the edges.

The defense doesn't quite know what to expect from Oregon State, but Schiano has studied tendencies from Smith's previous stop at Washington and the schemes favored by Beavers new offensive coordinator Brian Lindgren during his five years at Colorado.

"I think in games like this ... you really have to spend some double time studying both, but not marrying yourself to either, because you may get a third, you may be a hybrid of both," Schiano said.

Oregon State just settled on a quarterback this week. Smith named 6-foot-7 Jake Luton the winner of a three-player competition that started in the spring and continued into fall camp.

Luton started four games last season before he suffered a thoracic fracture during a game against Washington State. He completed 83 of 135 passes for 853 yards, four touchdowns and four interceptions. "We're completely behind Jake," Smith said. "We're going to put him out there. We understand that he's not going to play perfect football. There's going to be some mistakes get made."

Smith's first game as a head coach won't be any easy one, taking a young team into the Horseshoe that's missing several injured players. There are nine true freshmen on the two-deep roster and possibly five first-time starters.

"We're definitely going to tell them there's an excitement level, and that's OK," Smith said. "And there's going to be nerves, and that's OK. But when it comes down to it, you have to trust your preparation, that you put in all this work and let it all hang out."

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Beavers

--QB Jake Luton hwon the starting job after an open competition in training camp against sophomores Conor Blount and Jack Coletto. The senior, who began his career at Idaho before attending junior college, started the first four games of 2017 before suffering a season-ending injury. "What separated Jake was really the last three, four practices," coach Jonathan Smith said. "It's not always the highlight plays that stand out, it was some of those plays where you just avoid the negative."

--RB Artavis Pierce served as Ryan Nall's primary backup last season and it's now his turn to get the ball on a regular basis. The junior ran for 323 yards and one touchdown and added 15 catches for 128 yards last year. He's also in line to return kickoffs, averaging 20 yards per return in 2017.

--LB Jonathan Willis is OSU's top returning defender in terms of sacks (3.0) and tackles for loss (6.0). With Manase Hungalu graduating -- he's in training camp with the Jacksonville Jaguars -- the Beavers will turn to the senior for leadership in the middle.

Buckeyes

--QB Dwayne Haskins will make his first start, replacing four-year starter J.T. Barrett. Much is expected from the sophomore, particularly as a passer. He showed poise and a big arm in leading a comeback win last season at Michigan when he took over for injured Barrett. In limited action last year backing up Barrett, Haskins completed 70.2 percent of his passes with four touchdowns and one interception. Day said Haskins transformed his body during the offseason to reduce body fat and add strength to help him stay healthy during a long season.

--DE Nick Bosa will provide a stern test for Oregon State's offensive line. A preseason All-American who is No. 2 on NFLDraftScout.com's ranking of the top prospects in the NFL Draft class of 2019, Bosa enters the season with 63 total tackles, including 23 tackles for a loss and 13.5 sacks. The hard-charging junior has had to share time with a number of other talented defensive linemen who are now in the NFL but he'll probably be on the field more this season.

FLORIDA ATLANTIC AT OKLAHOMA**GAME SNAPSHOT:****KICKOFF:** Saturday, noon ET**SITE:** Gaylord Family, Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, Norman, Okla.**TV:** Fox**SERIES:** First meeting**RANKINGS:** Oklahoma No. 7**KEYS TO THE GAME**

Coach Lane Kiffin is playing it coy regarding who his starting quarterback will be when his Florida Atlantic team takes on No. 7 Oklahoma on Saturday in Norman.

But Kiffin did have plenty to say about Sooners starting quarterback Kyler Murray, who earned the full-time starter role after beating out Austin Kendall in the preseason.

Murray started three games as a true freshman at Texas A&M in 2015 before transferring, then served as Baker Mayfield's backup a year ago -- starting one game when Mayfield was suspended for the opening drive against West Virginia.

Murray's speed is what keeps Kiffin up at night.

"These are the guys you want to play the least," Kiffin said. "I have always thought they give you the most problems. The guys that when plays don't happen in rhythm -- like a lot of plays in football, especially college -- they have the ability to get out of trouble.

"You can cover everybody, have our match plays perfect, the guy still takes off and runs for 15 yards. He is very difficult to deal with."

A year ago, Oklahoma entered the season with no questions at quarterback with Mayfield, the eventual Heisman Trophy winner, but with plenty at running back and wide receiver.

This season, the Sooners have plenty of firepower returning at running back and wide receiver but a question mark at quarterback after Mayfield's departure.

Murray struggled with interceptions during his freshman year but Sooners coach Lincoln Riley said he expected a big leap this season, especially when it comes to throwing.

"We certainly wouldn't have named him the starter without that," Riley said. "He's got a very strong arm and really spins the ball well. He's very accurate. I think for him, it's just settling into game situations and translating from what we've seen on the practice field over into the game field."

Florida Atlantic will be breaking in a new quarterback as well. Kiffin will choose between a pair of players who started their careers at Power Five programs.

Chris Robison signed with Oklahoma out of high school before being dismissed shortly after his arrival in Norman. DeAndre Johnson began at Florida State before being dismissed in 2015 after an incident at a Tallahassee bar where he punched a woman.

Robison transferred immediately to FAU. Johnson went to East Mississippi Community College before finding his way to Kiffin's squad.

Riley recruited Robison and said he is rooting for the quarterback's success after the season opener.

"He looks really comfortable," Kiffin said of Robison after the Owls' final tune-up scrimmage. "Good command. Had him playing fast. He did some good things."

Like the Sooners and Rodney Anderson, Florida Atlantic has a proven running back in junior Devin Singletary. Singletary rushed for 1,920 yards and 32 touchdowns a year ago.

Oklahoma middle linebacker Kenneth Murray said he has been impressed with what he has seen from Singletary.

"He has a lot to his game," Murray said. "He's a real good jump-cut guy, real explosive. You're gonna have to wrap him up. I've done a breakdown of FAU. I'm really impressed with his game."

Murray figures to be a key if Oklahoma's defense is to improve this season.

The Sooners had the best offense in college football a year ago with Mayfield in charge, but in the Rose Bowl against Georgia in last season's College Football Playoff, the defense struggled to contain the Bulldogs, especially on the ground.

While Riley announced his starting quarterback, the Sooners have other spots that are open heading into the final week -- primarily on defense.

Linebacker Caleb Kelly, who has started 19 games over the past two seasons, is fighting with redshirt senior Curtis Bolton to be the starter at the weakside spot.

The other area of focus for Oklahoma's defense heading into the last few days before the opener are the safety spots, where Kahlil Haughton and Jordan Parker are battling to start at free safety. Redshirt

freshman Justin Broiles and sophomore Robert Barnes are battling to start at strong safety after Barnes was in and out of the starting lineup a year ago

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Owls

--RB Devin Singletary earned third-team all-America honors last year to become the first from the program to earn such recognition. He rushed for 1,920 yards and 32 touchdowns last year, posting 100-yard rushing games over the last 12 outings. He also had 198 yards on 19 receptions.

--WR Willie Wright is a key figure in the passing game. He led the Owls in receiving with 56 receptions for 657 yards with a team-best six touchdown receptions in 2017.

--LB Azeez Al-Shaair was one of three all-conference (Conference USA) selections on defense for the Owls last year. He also earned league Defensive Player of the Year recognition after getting in on 147 tackles, topping off his year with 13 stops in the bowl rout of Toledo.

Sooners

--RB Rodney Anderson ran for more than 1,000 yards over the final eight games in 2017 and enters the season as the clear top option in the running game. Those big totals included 201 yards and a pair of touchdowns in the Rose Bowl loss to Georgia. Riley said Anderson's ability to run the ball -- and the line's ability to block -- will be key especially early in the season as Murray settles in. "You've got to be able to take pressure off," Riley said. "If people can just sit there and tee off on you one or the other eventually it's going to catch up with you."

--LB Kenneth Murray had a bit of a rocky freshman year. The middle linebacker earned the starting job and held onto it all year but had plenty moments of learning in there. Against an offense that can run the ball the way the Owls do, Murray figures to get a big test right out of the gate as a sophomore. "I feel like last year I kind of played off raw athleticism," Murray said. "I really didn't understand the scheme of things that I was trying to do." Murray said that's changed this year and he should be able to be more of a disruptive force.

WASHINGTON VS. AUBURN**GAME SNAPSHOT:****KICKOFF:** Saturday, 3:30 p.m. ET**SITE:** Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta**TV:** ABC**SERIES:** First meeting**RANKINGS:** Washington No. 6, Auburn No. 9**KEYS TO THE GAME**

In what just might serve as an early season preview or possibly an early elimination game for the College Football Playoff, No. 6 Washington and No. 9 Auburn tee it off Saturday in the Chick-fil-A Kickoff Classic.

Kickoff in Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium is 3:30 p.m. ET with ABC's cameras catching the action.

The Pac-12 vs. SEC showdown looks to offer defensive approaches that, in an era of high scores, serve as throwbacks.

Coaches Gus Malzahn at Auburn and Chris Petersen at Washington have both built their reputations on offensive innovation: Malzahn coordinated the Tigers' 2010 national championship offense, and coached three teams that ranked No. 26 or better nationally in points scored since 2013.

Petersen, also a former offensive coordinator, gained fame in his first season as head coach at Boise State, calling a variety of high-risk plays in a Fiesta Bowl win over Oklahoma that launched both that program and his name into the stratosphere.

But at this time, however, it is their teams' respective defenses that pique the other's interest.

"Their defense jumps out right away," Petersen said of Auburn. "That is a physical group that doesn't make a lot of mistakes. ... Sometimes when guys are moving the ball and scoring points, it's broken-down plays when quarterbacks are scrambling."

The strength of Auburn's defense, which held opponents to just 18.3 points per game and a 3.6-per carry rushing yield in 2017, begins at linebacker. Returners Deshaun Davis and Darrell Williams combined for almost 140 tackles a season ago.

Likewise, Malzahn offered effusive praise of the Huskies' defense.

"They fly to the football. You can tell they really know their responsibilities," Malzahn said. "It's impressive to watch. They're very good against the run, and the secondary is one of the best in the country."

Each program took a different path to the defensive reputation its cultivated heading into 2018. Washington coordinator Pete Kwiatkowski is a longtime assistant to Petersen, working first as a defensive line coach at Boise State in 2006 before assuming the same position there that now he holds for the Huskies.

The stability Washington enjoys in coaching leadership extends onto the field this season, with the Huskies returning nine starters on that side of the ball.

"I think it's the best defense we've had," said defensive back JoJo McIntosh. "We've lost players over the years, but we keep getting more and more players, and we keep getting better and better."

After a difficult 2014 season with Ellis Johnson, Malzahn brought current South Carolina head coach Will Muschamp back to the Plains, but the Tigers saw little improvement. The defense now is under the tutelage of Kevin Steele.

"Coach Muschamp was a really good coach ... but a lot of guys couldn't pick up the system," Davis said at July's SEC media days. "We had to move on, and I'm glad coach Steele came in. He's doing a great job with us now."

Steele won SEC Defensive Coordinator of the Year in 2017 -- a meaningful award, given the emphasis the conference places on that side of the ball.

The SEC has collectively staked its reputation on defensive prowess through a run in which it won eight of 10 national championships. In essence, Washington is tasked with beating Auburn at its, and the SEC's, own game.

The Huskies must also do so in the epicenter of SEC country.

"I'd love to play in a neutral-site game," said Petersen with a laugh. "I don't think we're playing in a neutral-site game. It's very much their backyard. It's a home game on a different field for them."

Just a 90-minute drive from the Auburn University campus, Atlanta has become something of a home-away-home for the Tigers. Saturday marks the program's third consecutive game at Mercedes-Benz Stadium, dating to last season's SEC Championship Game and Peach Bowl.

Auburn lost both, but Malzahn seemed unfazed with the Tigers' recent misfortune there.

"We like playing there; that's where they play the SEC Championship. That's our goal every year," Malzahn said.

But that's not for another three months. Week 1 may feel like ancient history by then, but it sets the course for both teams' seasons

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Huskies

--QB Jake Browning begins his fourth season starting at quarterback. Browning hit his statistical peak in 2016, passing for 34 touchdowns and just three interceptions through the first nine games. But a late-season shoulder injury slowed him (nine touchdowns, six interceptions) and in 2017, he never regained that initial 2016 output.

--RB Myles Gaskin opted to return to Washington for his senior season, holding off on the NFL for a year and perhaps surprising outside observers. Gaskin eclipsed 1,300 yards rushing in each of his first three seasons, and in 2017 hit personal milestones of 21 rushing touchdowns and three receiving scores.

--DT Greg Gaines faced some injury questions in training camp, though multiple reports suggest the 6-foot-2, 322-pound presence on the interior of Washington's defensive line will be ready for Week 1. Gaines becomes the focal point on the Huskies front with Vita Vea gone for the NFL. His ability to plug running lanes will be pivotal in Washington's attempt to slow explosive Auburn running back Kam Martin, whose 6.1 per carry average led the Tigers' three-man running back rotation a season ago.

Tigers

--RB Kam Martin looks to have to carry the bulk of the rushing load with the departures of Kerryon Johnson and Kamryn Pettway. Martin was Auburn's No. 2 rusher in 2017 with 453 yards on 74 carries. Unlike the last couple of seasons with Johnson and Pettway, there is little in the way of experienced depth at the position, though coach Gus Malzahn has seen potential in the newcomers.

--WR Ryan Davis will be working against Washington's veteran and all-star caliber secondary. He was Auburn's leading pass catcher last year with 84 receptions for 815 yards, more than double the number of catches of anybody else on the team.

APPALACHIAN STATE AT PENN STATE**GAME SNAPSHOT****KICKOFF:** Saturday, 1:30 p.m. ET**SITE:** Beaver Stadium, University Park, Pa.**TV:** Big Ten Network**SERIES:** First meeting**RANKINGS:** Penn State No. 10**KEYS TO THE GAME**

The expectations are high again in Happy Valley as James Franklin enters his fifth season at Penn State -- even with some of the big names from last season gone.

Franklin's No. 10 Nittany Lions get their season started this Saturday with a 3:30 p.m. ET kickoff against Appalachian State at Beaver Stadium in State College, Pa.

"We've still got a few more days we need to clean up some things and get ready for this game and so we can go and play fast and aggressive come Saturday," Franklin said Tuesday at his weekly press conference, "but I like where we're at."

Penn State is led offensively by senior quarterback Trace McSorley, who is heading into his third season as the starter. One of the most experienced quarterbacks in the nation, McSorley threw for 3,570 yards, 28 touchdowns and 10 interceptions in 2017 while also rushing for 491 yards and 11 scores.

McSorley could be a Heisman Trophy contender in 2018, but there were some notable departures around him following the 2017 campaign.

Penn State is, of course, without superstar running back Saquon Barkley. He left the school after his junior season and was picked second overall by the New York Giants in the 2018 NFL draft.

Miles Sanders will get his first look as Penn State's starting running back, replacing Barkley. As a sophomore last season, Sanders ran for 191 yards on 31 carries in 10 games.

The Nittany Lions also lost their leading receiver, DaeSean Hamilton (857 yards, nine touchdowns in 2017), and top tight end Mike Gesicki (563 yards, nine touchdowns in 2017) to graduation.

Additionally, Penn State has a new offensive coordinator in Ricky Rahne. Joe Moorhead, who ran the seventh-best scoring offense in the nation last season, moved from his role as the Nittany Lions' OC to Mississippi State's head coach.

Penn State has even more players to replace on defense. The Nittany Lions lost eight starters from their 2017 defense -- a unit that gave up just 16.5 points per game, the seventh-best mark in the country.

"I think we all know, we've got a lot of question marks this year, probably more than we've had the past two years, and I think we have a very, very challenging schedule. But I'm excited," Franklin told reporters at Penn State's media day in early August.

"...We've got a good-looking football team. We're athletic. We're inexperienced but we're talented."

Penn State, which won the Fiesta Bowl last year and finished the season ranked No. 8, is coming off back-to-back 11-win seasons. The Nittany Lions are hoping for their second conference title in three seasons in a Big Ten that features five teams in the top 14 of the AP poll to start the season.

Penn State is also trying to win at least 10 games in three straight seasons for the first time since 1980-1982.

Appalachian State, meanwhile, is 30-9 in its last three seasons and claimed a share of the Sun Belt title in both 2016 and 2017. The Mountaineers went 9-4 last season and were 34-0 winners over Toledo in the Dollar General Bowl.

Now in its fifth season as an FBS program, Appalachian State is still best remembered for its 2007 upset of Michigan. The program will try to shock the nation again Saturday, and the Mountaineers will have to do it with a new starting quarterback.

Redshirt sophomore Zac Thomas will be making his first collegiate start at the 107,000-seat Beaver Stadium. He replaces Taylor Lamb, who started the final 49 games of his Appalachian State career under center. Thomas threw for 33 yards on 10 attempts last season and also ran for 45 yards.

"There's a lot of stuff put on me to be a team leader," Thomas told AppStateSports.com. "You're watching more film, learning defenses inside and out, getting that extra work with receivers to get the timing down."

The Mountaineers do return running back Jalin Moore, who has rushed for more than 1,000 yards in both of the last two seasons. Moore is one of six returning starters on Appalachian State's offense, and the team brings back five starters on defense.

PLAYERS TO WATCH**Mountaineers**

--RB Jalin Moore is something of a physical freak, especially for a Sun Belt Conference team. "Has run 4:37 in a 40 and 38.5 vertical jump, 11-1 broad jump, 390-bench," Penn State coach James Franklin said. "I mean, this guy obviously is a specimen and was the Sun Belt offensive Player of the Year. So that will be challenging."

--DB Clifton Duck was selected the Sun Belt's "Best Cover Corner" in Lindy's magazines as he is coming off an all-conference season. He leads the "Legion of Boone" secondary, which has helped Appalachian State -- in Boone, N.C., of course -- rank second nationally with 56 interceptions since the start of the 2015 season.

--DT Myquon Stout made 41 tackles last season, ranking third among Sun Belt interior linemen and first among returning interior linemen in the league. He has started 25 of the past 26 games, only giving way on Senior Day in 2016.

Nittany Lions

--RB Miles Sanders is the talented heir apparent to Saquon Barkley. Sanders was rated the top high school running back in the 2016 class, but he's had to wait -- and learn -- behind Barkley. Sanders has a ton of talent, but he has a lot to prove, considering he hasn't rushed more than seven times in any game.

--DE Shareef Miller is one of only two returning starters on defense, considering the opposite end, Ryan Buchholz, had to give up football during camp because of injuries. Miller led the team last in sacks (five) and tackles for loss (11) en route to third-team All-Big Ten honors.

--TE Pat Freiermuth, a true freshman, has a "green light" to play this season, coach James Franklin said. He and others will help fill the void left by Mike Gesicki. "I think he can factor in partly because of how talented he is and how poised he's been through this process, but also that he's 258, if not 260 pounds, and I think that helps the physical aspect of the game," Franklin said of Freiermuth.

MICHIGAN AT NOTRE DAME**GAME SNAPSHOT**

KICKOFF: Saturday, 7:30 p.m. ET

SITE: Notre Dame Stadium, South Bend, Ind.

TV: NBC

SERIES: Michigan leads 24-17-1

RANKINGS: Notre Dame No. 12; Michigan No. 14

KEYS TO THE GAME

The hype hasn't just been months in the making. It's been years.

When Michigan and Notre Dame renew their storied football rivalry in South Bend on Saturday, the game will mean more than just a season-opening contest between two of the top-six winningest programs in college football history.

It will be the first meeting between the schools since 2014, will be a signature game of college football's first full Saturday of action and will already have implications in the national title race, with Notre Dame entering the season ranked No. 12 and Michigan No. 14.

"I think it's great for college football," Notre Dame head coach Brian Kelly said. "Notre Dame football and Michigan football is really a great rivalry. I think everyone wanted to see it happen and I'm really happy we are able to get that done."

Following Notre Dame's 31-0 win at home over Michigan in 2014, the rivalry appeared dead.

In 2012, Notre Dame exercised a contract provision to end the series with Michigan, even though the programs technically had a deal to play each year through 2031.

Notre Dame at the time cited a desire to play a stronger schedule, but interest in the rivalry renewed when Michigan athletic director David Brandon and head coach Brady Hoke were fired after the 2014 season.

When Michigan hired Jim Harbaugh, talks intensified and in 2016, the teams agreed to renew their rivalry for the 2018 and 2019 seasons.

Michigan actually had to back out of a series with Arkansas to make room to play the Fighting Irish.

Notre Dame will play at Ann Arbor next season.

"I feel good about renewing the rivalry," Harbaugh said. "It makes a lot of sense. We'll get on the bus, we'll go to South Bend and make a 2 1/2-hour drive. They can do the same when they come here. It makes a lot of sense."

The college football world has been counting down to Saturday for a long time, and when kickoff finally arrives, it figures to be a low-scoring battle between what many predict will be two of the nation's top defenses in 2018.

Michigan returns 10 starters on defense from a unit that was 13th in the nation in scoring defense last year and is littered with both future NFL draft picks and All-American candidates.

Junior Rashan Gary and senior Chase Winovich are two of the country's premier edge rushers, juniors Devin Bush and Khaleke Hudson are two of the nation's most versatile linebackers, and the duo of David Long and Lavert Hill provide blanket coverage at cornerback.

Notre Dame shouldn't be a slouch defensively, either.

The Fighting Irish return nine starters off a unit that was 31st in the country in scoring defense last year, led by junior cornerback Julian Love, returning leading tackler and senior linebacker Te'Von Coney and senior lineman Jerry Tillery.

The game will also mark the much-anticipated Michigan debut of quarterback Shea Patterson, who transferred from Ole Miss and was granted immediate eligibility.

Several Michigan fans have felt quarterback play has been the biggest eyesore the past two years, and are anxiously awaiting to see if Patterson will be the answer at that position and complement an outstanding defense.

"He's really been good," Harbaugh said. "His level of focus and intensity during practice and execution has been really good. I felt like he was one who was playing the best and gives our team the best chance to win."

Notre Dame fans also are anxious to see what the quarterback situation for their team will be like this year.

Running quarterback Brandon Wimbush is the starter, but Ian Book, more of a pure passer, is ready to fill in if Wimbush struggles.

Book came off the bench to help lead Notre Dame to a 21-17 win over LSU in the Citrus Bowl on New Year's Day.

Kelly said he's anxious to see how Wimbush's offseason improvements translate on what might be college football's biggest opening weekend stage.

"I love the way (Brandon) has been leading," Kelly said. "He attacked it in the offseason. He attacked his weaknesses and continued to sharpen his strengths. What I love about the most about him is that he's a humble leader. He took the time to work on any of the things he felt like he needed to work on, as well as became more of a vocal leader for us."

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Wolverines

--QB Shea Patterson, a transfer from Ole Miss, beat out sophomore Brandon Peters and redshirt freshman Dylan McCaffrey for the starting job. Coach Jim Harbaugh said Patterson "was the one who was playing the best and gives us the best chance of winning." A junior, Patterson started 10 games in 2016-17 for Ole Miss including the first seven of last season before getting injured. In those seven starts last fall he threw for 2,259 yards and 17 touchdowns and a 63.8 percent completion rate.

--RB Karan Higdon, one of four captains on this year's team, is trying to become the first Michigan player to rush for 1,000 yards in a season since QB Denard Robinson (1,266) in 2012. The senior came oh so close last year, finishing with 994 yards and 11 TDs.

--LB Devin Bush finds his name on numerous preseason watch lists after recording 102 tackles last season, sixth-most in the Big Ten. The junior had at least five takedowns in every game in 2017.

--K Quinn Nordin figures to factor into the outcome, with points likely to be at a premium. As a sophomore he was 19 of 24 on field goal attempts, making 6 of 8 from beyond 40 yards, and led the Big Ten in three-pointers.

Fighting Irish

--WR Chase Claypool has a chance to emerge as a go-to receiver this season. He leads all returning wideouts after hauling in 29 catches for 402 yards (13.9 yards per reception) last season. He also has flashed big-play ability with a nine-catch, 180-yard performance against Wake Forest late last year.

--LB Te'von Coney will look to set the tone for the defense after leading the squad with 116 tackles in 2017. That included a career-high 13 tackles for loss to go along with three sacks, a forced fumble and a fumble recovery.

UNLV AT SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA**GAME SNAPSHOT****KICKOFF:** Saturday, 4 p.m. ET**SITE:** L.A. Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles**TV:** Pac-12 Networks**SERIES:** USC leads 1-0, winning 35-21 in 1997**RANKINGS:** USC No. 15**KEYS TO THE GAME**

Under different circumstances, the newly named starting quarterback of No. 15-ranked USC, J.T. Daniels, would be preparing for a game Friday night against La Mirada High School.

Instead, Daniels' decision to reclassify from the 2019 recruiting class and leave Mater Dei High School has him now prepping to make his collegiate debut Saturday against UNLV at Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

"The thing J.T. did a really good job of is, when the ball was put down in our live-game scrimmage situations, the ball moved -- and it looked easy for him," said USC coach Clay Helton of Daniels, who becomes the first true freshman to start at quarterback for the Trojans since Matt Barkley in 2009.

Barkley also came to USC via nearby Mater Dei and held the starting job through 2012.

In another coincidental twist, Daniels' Mater Dei teammates fared well without the new Trojans quarterback last week against Las Vegas Bishop Gorman, winning 42-0. UNLV coach Tony Sanchez previously led Bishop Gorman before taking the college opening just a few miles down the road.

"Known coach Sanchez for a long time, and really proud of what he's been able to accomplish, both at the high school level and at the college level," said Helton, who as a USC assistant during Sanchez's tenure at Bishop Gorman, established a working relationship with the Rebels coach.

Referencing the strides UNLV has made as Sanchez enters his fourth season at the helm, Helton cited three losses by a combined 14 points, which effectively denied the Rebels a bowl bid.

With a background coaching both high school and college, Sanchez has his own, unique perspective on the challenges a first-timer like Daniels faces.

"He's a freshman, and it is college football, so the game's going to be a little faster," Sanchez said. "He'll be ready, but he's still young and there's still a little bit of a learning curve."

UNLV quarterback Armani Rogers understands the position in which Daniels finds himself on Saturday. Rogers started from Game 1 a season ago as a freshman, and despite the benefit of a redshirt season, still faced initial growing pains.

Once he settled in, Rogers finished with 1,471 yards passing and six touchdowns, and another 780 yards rushing with eight scores. He said the lumps taken and lessons learned in Year 1 have him feeling more comfortable ahead of his sophomore campaign.

"It's a big difference. You know what to expect, you know the defenses, you know how to watch film," he said. "It's a lot different type of preparing from what I did last year and what I'm doing now. It's (about) being more mature."

Rogers played his high school ball at Los Angeles Hamilton, garnering some recruiting interest from Pac-12 programs Cal, UCLA and Utah, before landing at UNLV. He was also on USC's radar, and Helton remains impressed with the quarterback's progress into this second season.

"You look at the run-threat that he is, and how big and physical of a man he is, it just jumps off the film," Helton said of the 6-foot-6 Rogers. "With him and (running back) Lexington (Thomas) back there, you're talking about 2,100 rushing yards between the two and the 16th-best rushing offense in the country last year."

"I've been so impressed with him not only as a runner, but his ability to create in the passing game," added Helton. "You see how many yards he picks up when things break down, and that's a great luxury to have."

Indeed, it's a luxury USC had most of the previous two seasons with Sam Darnold at quarterback. The current New York Jets quarterback's ability to salvage possessions, escaping would-be tacklers and finding open teammates on seemingly busted plays, became a defining hallmark for the Trojans in 2017.

Emulating Darnold's contributions might be a big ask of Daniels, at least initially. Just how much responsibility Helton and offensive coordinator Tee Martin decide to give the freshman quarterback impacts UNLV's approach.

"It'll be interesting to see how they use (Daniels)," Sanchez said. "Are they going to run their stuff and throw it around the yard? Are they going to try to protect him a little bit and run the football?"

Certainly, it's a different pregame forecast than if Daniels was preparing to face La Mirada.

PLAYERS TO WATCH**Rebels**

--RB Lexington Thomas, a senior, earned first-team All-Mountain West honors last season, along with NFL first-round pick Rashaad Penny (Seahawks). Thomas rushed for 1,336 yards and 17 touchdowns as he helped the Rebels rank 18th nationally in rushing. "Lexington Lightning" has 12 career games with 100-plus yards and eight runs of at least 55 yards.

--QB Armani Rogers has set the school record for single-game rushing yards by a quarterback (193 vs. New Mexico last season) and for a season with 780. In just his second season, Rogers could break the school career mark for rushing yards by a quarterback. That record is held by Jason Thomas (2000-2002), who piled up 1,528 yards on the ground.

--PK Evan Pantels, a senior, has connected on 30 of 36 field goal attempts in his career, for a school-best percentage of 83.3. He is 23 of 23 from inside 40 yards has never missed a PAT. He needs five more makes to break Kyle Watson's school record of 74 consecutive PATs.

Trojans

--WR Amon-Ra St. Brown arrived at USC with five-star recruiting billing, from a pipeline that has historically been good to the program at nearby Mater Dei. St. Brown earned praise coming out of training camp, and his integration into the lineup adds another dimension to a wide-receiving corps returning promising 2017 contributors Tyler Vaughns and Michael Pittman Jr.

--OLB John Houston Jr. came on strong late in 2017, recording 40 of his 84 tackles in USC's final five games. Houston came as part of the ballyhooed class of 2015 linebacker signees along with Cameron Smith and Porter Gustin. While he was not the same immediate impact player, redshirting in 2015 and playing as a reserve in 2016, his progression at the end of 2017 sets the foundation for a breakout season akin to the all-conference performance Uchenna Nwosu a season ago.

SOUTHERN AT TEXAS CHRISTIAN**GAME SNAPSHOT:****KICKOFF:** Saturday, noon ET**SITE:** Amon G. Carter Stadium, Fort Worth, Texas**TV:** FSN**SERIES:** First meeting**RANKINGS:** TCU No. 16**KEYS TO THE GAME**

TCU doesn't figure to have too much trouble handling Southern University in its season opener Saturday, but the 16th-ranked Horned Frogs are just happy to be able to beat up on someone other than themselves. They have plenty to gain from what amounts to a scrimmage that counts and gets them off on the right foot.

Kickoff at Amon G. Carter Stadium in Fort Worth is noon on Fox Sports.

The contest is an opportunity to continue the development of sophomore quarterback Shawn Robinson, who is the latest in the line of TCU's dual-threat signal-callers. It's also a chance for one or two players out of the Horned Frogs' stable of running backs to announce himself as the No. 1 main option moving forward.

And there's a chance for monster defensive end Ben Banogu to begin his proliferation of sacks and tackles for a loss, basically using the Jaguars as fodder for the challenges to come the rest of the year.

TCU and Southern are meeting for the first time. The Horned Frogs are facing an opponent from the Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC) for just the third time in their history after defeating Jackson State 63-0 last season and Grambling State 56-0 in their 2012 season opener.

Coach Gary Patterson said that he is relieved to have his Horned Frogs back on a somewhat normal practice schedule and that his players are ready to get into game action, but they aren't overlooking Southern.

"We have been banged up," Patterson said. "I feel a lot better now. ... We are tired of hitting each other, excited to play a ball game and get into the season.

"We're playing a Southern team I think that does a lot of good things. They do a nice job coaching. They do a lot of things that cause you problems. We've taken them very seriously."

TCU's offensive line has been one of the biggest questions going into the season as four key contributors from last year's team are now in NFL camps. But Patterson continued to heap praise on the unit and its work in preseason camp.

"Our offensive line, I'll be honest, has been the big surprise," Patterson said. "They've really gotten better. We still have to keep getting better at one of the tackles. I won't say which one."

Southern made it official and named quarterback John Lampley the starter for the season opener at TCU, coach Dawson Odums announced this week.

The move comes with little surprise after Odums named Lampley the front-runner in the three-person race early last week. The 6-foot-2 sophomore from Georgia will get his first career start against the No. 16 team in the country.

"We have three very good quarterbacks," Odums said. "John is just slightly above those guys from a consistency standpoint and that's really what we look for out of that quarterback position."

Southern, which went 7-4 last season, is a traditional powerhouse in the SWAC and in the HBCU ranks in general. Southern couldn't participate in the SWAC Championship or the Celebration Bowl, however, due to NCAA academic progress rate violations.

The Jaguars' first two games (at TCU and at Louisiana Tech) are tough, but the rest of the schedule is winnable if this team finds its stride and can stay healthy

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Jaguars

--QB John Lampley saw action in seven games last season. He was 14-of-26 passing for 114 yards and didn't throw an interception. He also rushed for 118 yards and a touchdown.

--WR Jamar Washington led the Jaguars in receiving with 38 receptions that were good for 408 yards. He had three touchdown catches.

--S Andrea Augustine was named to the preseason all-SWAC team. He finished 2017 with 53 tackles and two passes broken up.

--DB Montavious Gaines was right behind Augustine in tackles with 52 stops. He also had two interceptions.

Horned Frogs

--QB Shawn Robinson will follow in the footsteps of Trevone Boykin and Kenny Hill in leading TCU's offense as a "dual threat" quarterback. Robinson has a more impressive arm than his predecessors and a thrilling supporting cast. He went 13-of-27 passing last year for 184 yards and three touchdowns as Hill's primary backup and added 159 rushing yards on 23 carries.

--RB Darius Anderson is by far TCU's most explosive and dependable playmaker entering the 2018 season. A would-be 1,000-yard rusher if not for a season-ending foot injury suffered against Oklahoma in Norman, Anderson will be leaned on heavily to move the chains if the passing game fails or offensive line falters. If he can remain healthy, he'll serve as the leading blow for the best 1-2 running back punch in the Big 12 along with hammerhead option Sewo Olonilua.

WEST VIRGINIA AT TENNESSEE**GAME SNAPSHOT:****KICKOFF:** Saturday, 3:30 p.m. ET**SITE:** Bank of America Stadium, Charlotte, North Carolina**TV:** CBS**SERIES:** First meeting**RANKINGS:** West Virginia No. 17**KEYS TO THE GAME**

West Virginia has been looking at its 2018 season opener against Tennessee for quite some time.

"The anticipation for this game has been lingering for about the past five years," Mountaineers coach Dana Holgorsen said. "We've done our due diligence. It's always game 1, and this one more than others in the past, is all about adjustments and how fast we make them. As a coaching staff, we've prepared for this game more than others we have in recent memory."

The 17th-ranked Mountaineers and unranked Volunteers will kick off at 3:30 p.m. Saturday at Bank of America Stadium in Charlotte, North Carolina. CBS will be there to cover Jeremy Pruitt's debut as the Vols coach.

"My emotions are probably the same way before I tee off on the golf course," Pruitt said. "If you're going to play, you're going to win. That's why we do what we do. I'm excited to have an opportunity to see what our team is going to be like because it really doesn't matter what has been done in the past anywhere."

The Mountaineers will be led by a quarterback that's expected to vie for the Heisman Trophy and an offense that's one of the most explosive in the country.

Quarterback Will Grier, the top returning signal-caller in the Big 12, leads a prodigious offense that features wide receiver David Sills V, who caught 60 passes and hauled in 18 TD catches last year. They have augmented their team with an improving defense that features transfers from USC and Auburn.

Tennessee is a bit of a wild card. The Volunteers are coming off a 4-8 season in which they were winless in the Southeastern Conference with Pruitt, the former defensive coordinator at Alabama, at the helm.

"If you look at what we think they're going to do, we can sit here and guess all we want," Holgorsen said. "The truth of the matter is we really don't know what they're going to do."

It's the first-ever matchup between the storied programs.

"We're aware of all of their coaches and where they've been; we've accumulated video on everywhere; we've watched their spring game, which, really, probably doesn't mean a whole lot," Holgorsen added. "We watched some of their games from last year to see what their personnel is like. They're big and fast and strong, and I imagine they're a little bit more motivated to play for a new coaching staff than they were toward the end of last year."

This is the fourth time in the past five years West Virginia is opening its season against a Power 5 opponent. And for the third time in the last five years the game will be played either as a true road contest or on a neutral field.

There are always uncertainties when preparing for an opening-game opponent, but in the case of Tennessee, there are multiple variables considering the newness of the Volunteer coaching staff and Pruitt's willingness to play two quarterbacks.

During an appearance Sunday on the Vol Network's football preseason special, Pruitt indicated that Stanford transfer Keller Chryst and redshirt sophomore Jarrett Guarantano could see action against the Mountaineers, while sophomore Will McBride and freshman J.T. ShROUT haven't been publicly ruled out yet, either.

"When it comes to game week, the most important thing is to do what your players can do," Pruitt said. "Don't ask them to do something they're not capable of doing. It doesn't matter what we know as coaches, it's important what the players know."

Tennessee knows that to have a chance to beat West Virginia it will have to stop the run after giving up 251.3 yards per game in 2017, create turnovers and find some explosive plays.

"We have to take care of the football," Pruitt said. "If you look at all the Power 5 games last year, probably the two most important stats are turnovers and explosive plays. If you take that into account, offensively, you need to find a way to create explosive plays, and you need to find a way to take care of the football. Defensively, you need to eliminate explosive plays and get turnovers."

PLAYERS TO WATCH**Mountaineers**

--QB Will Grier is coming off a season in which he was named Big 12 Newcomer of the Year after collecting more than 3,600 yards of total offense with 36 touchdowns before suffering a season-ending injury on Nov. 18 against Texas. He missed the final two regular-season games as well as the Heart of Dallas Bowl. The former Florida transfer passed for at least 300 yards in a game nine times last season and threw multiple touchdowns in 10 games including back-to-back games with five touchdowns against Texas Tech and Baylor.

--RB Kennedy McCoy has had his share of carries over his first two years but is now the Mountaineers' No. 1 rushing option. He's recorded double-digit carries in eight of his 23 career games, so he's no stranger to being a workhorse and will remain fresh because West Virginia will likely use a combination of other runners to keep the junior at his best. McCoy has enough speed to break off long runs, and his physicality on contact is unmatched.

--DE Ezekiel Rose played two seasons at the junior college level before transferring to West Virginia in January 2017, but the wait was worth it. After competing for playing time and earning some snaps last year, Rose will be a key fixture in the Mountaineers' front seven this fall. He led the squad in sacks last season with five, but the senior will need to improve on those numbers to be a real force. Rose showed his versatility when he hauled in an interception against Kansas State last year.

Volunteers

--LT Trey Smith returned to practice this month after missing time with lung clots that have sidelined the star left tackle since February. The Vols will utilize co-starters at right tackle and both guard positions, but coach Jeremy Pruitt believes Smith, a first-team preseason All-SEC honoree by the conference's coaches and reporters, provides the developing and shuffling line with the stability it will need to protect either Jarrett Guarantano or Keller Chryst.

--WR Jauan Jennings has recovered from a wrist injury that sidelined the redshirt junior for all but two games in 2017. Jennings should be the No. 1 target among Tennessee wide receivers while looking to improve upon his seven-touchdown, 580-yard freshman year in 2016.

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN AT MISSISSIPPI STATE**GAME SNAPSHOT:****KICKOFF:** Saturday, 7:30 p.m. ET**SITE:** Davis Wade Stadium, Starkville, Miss.**TV:** EPNU**SERIES:** First meeting**RANKINGS:** Mississippi State No. 18**KEYS TO THE GAME**

A bit of uncertainty hangs over Mississippi State, which will go into its season opener against Stephen F. Austin Saturday without its leader on offense.

Coach Joe Moorhead announced that quarterback Nick Fitzgerald will serve a one-game suspension for a rules violation dating back to last spring when the 18th-ranked Bulldogs host the FCS Lumberjacks at Starkville's Davis Wade Stadium. Kickoff on ESPU is at 7:30 p.m. ET.

"Nick's violation of team rules occurred in March," Moorhead said. "Since that time, he's been elected team captain and had an awesome spring, summer offseason conditioning and fall camp. He's been a great leader and a great teammate. He'll serve his suspension and come back and be our starter against Kansas State."

Moorhead as well as Stephen F. Austin's Jeff Byrd will be making their head coaching debuts. Moorhead comes to Starkville from Penn State, where he served as the Nittany Lions' offensive coordinator. Byrd is the interim coach for the Lumberjacks and has been on the job for less than a month.

Fitzgerald accounted for 2,600 yards and 29 touchdowns last year, but the Bulldogs seem to have a ready replacement for him. Fitzgerald was on crutches for the TaxSlayer Bowl last season after sustaining an ankle injury in the Egg Bowl against Old Miss, but Keytaon Thomas came in to lead the win over Louisville.

In his first start, Thomas went 11 of 20 for 127 yards, ran 27 times for 147 yards, and tied a Mississippi State bowl record with three rushing touchdowns in a 31-27 victory.

Thomas gets the start again against the Lumberjacks having earned the trust of his coaches and teammates.

"You're going to craft and tailor the game plan to the guys who are going to be out on the field," Moorhead said. "Certainly, Nick and K.T. share a similar skill set so there's really not much change in what we'd ask Nick to do and what we'd ask K.T. to do."

Wide receivers Stephen Guidry and Devonta Jason look to have the ability to stretch the field, and running Aeris Williams, who rushed for 1,107 yards and six touchdowns on 4.7 yards per carry last season, is a weapon in the running game.

Byrd has had a little more than three weeks to figure things out for the Lumberjacks since Clint Conque resigned. Conque had been suspended in June while the school investigated alleged violations of school policy.

Since then, the players have rallied behind Byrd.

"Every day we've gotten better and I think you can see it," Byrd said. "I've gone back and looked at some tape from Day 1, we've improved at every position. I still think we have competition for positions ... but those things are beginning to pan themselves out. Effort, attitude and intensity every day has been exactly what we want."

The Lumberjacks were voted to finish sixth in the Southland Conference's annual preseason poll as voted upon by the league's head coaches and sports information directors. Last season, the Lumberjacks went 4-7.

The good news is that 22 players with starting experience return, including 11 on the offensive side and eight on defense.

Byrd is hoping that junior running back Jamall Shaw, who was the Lumberjacks' second-leading rusher in 2017 with 266 yards on 77 carries, can carry the load on offense.

"The running back group, we've got a bunch of dogs back there," Shaw said. "We've all got different styles so it's fun to come out here and watch each other work."

"The quarterbacks and wide receivers are all clicking, I think it's going to be a big year for the offense. We just want to go out there and give it our best every day and get better."

The Lumberjacks return both of their starting quarterbacks from a season ago, including TCU senior transfer Foster Sawyer, who is coming a season-ending injury.

Junior Jake Blumrick, who started the first game of the 2017 season and the final seven, also returns. He compiled 1,654 passing yards, including eight touchdowns.

PLAYERS TO WATCH**Lumberjacks**

--QB Foster Sawyer passed for 623 yards, completing 68 of 104 pass attempts before going out with a season-ending knee injury after four games (three starts). He had four touchdown throws against only one interception. He is a transfer from TCU.

--WR Tamrick Pace was the team's leading receiver in 2017 with 53 receptions for 645 yards. He had five touchdown receptions to lead the Lumberjacks in that category as well.

--S Trenton Gordon was Stephen F. Austin's leading tackler last year. He was credited with 76 stops overall with 1.5 for losses in 10 games. He was recovered a fumble.

--S Alize Ward was right behind Gordon with 75 tackles. He also led the Lumberjacks in interceptions with four along with 10 passes broken up.

Bulldogs

--WR Austin Williams was nearly forced into action last season with all the injuries Mississippi State suffered at receiver. But after a year and a half on campus, Williams is set to make his collegiate debut this weekend and may very well have the best hands on the team.

--RB Nick Gibson may get overshadowed by backfield mates Aeris Williams and Kylin Hill at times but has shined when given the opportunity. Gibson, a former four-star recruit, is averaging 5.5 yards per carry over his career and led all tailbacks in that category last season.

--S Brian Cole was ruled ineligible last season after transferring in from East Mississippi Community College. Cole played wide receiver at Michigan as a true freshman and enjoyed a strong spring playing nickel back for the Bulldogs.

BOISE STATE AT TROY**GAME SNAPSHOT****KICKOFF:** Saturday, 6 p.m. ET**SITE:** Troy, Ala.**TV:** ESPNNEWS**SERIES:** Boise State leads 1-0**RANKINGS:** Boise State No. 22**KEYS TO THE GAME**

Boise State bright blue has become the gold standard for Group of Five conference programs. Look no further than the sentiment emanating from the No. 22-ranked Broncos' Week 1 opponent, Troy, for evidence.

"For sure, Boise (State is) at the level we're trying to get to," said Troy head coach Neal Brown. "It's a measuring-stick game for us, just to see where we're at. Boise -- and deservedly so -- is the highest ranked Group of Five team right now in a number of preseason magazines."

Through three different head coaching regimes, two different conference affiliations, and over 16 seasons, Boise State reached 10 wins 13 times. Last season's 11-3 finish included the Broncos' first Mountain West Conference championship since 2014 and was capped by a Las Vegas Bowl win over Oregon.

Reaching such a level year after year is the benchmark Brown wants for his program. A win Saturday at Veterans Memorial Stadium in Troy, Ala., would go a long way in that direction for the Trojans -- though they would need a few more years to catch up with the Broncos.

"The thing I really respect about Boise is the consistency," Brown said. "Not a whole lot of lows in the program over the last 12 to 15 years. Just unparalleled consistency."

"We definitely take pride in that, being the non-Power Five school that is consistently ranked every year," said Broncos quarterback Brett Rypien. "But, it's not something we necessarily think about. We just work hard and let the results take care themselves."

The results have indeed been there, maintaining through cycles of eligibility, and from the transitions of coach Dan Hawkins to Chris Petersen, and Petersen to current head coach Bryan Harsin in 2014.

Harsin coached Boise State to the Fiesta Bowl in his debut season, the first year of the College Football Playoff and the debut of the automatic New Year's Six bowl bid for the highest-ranked Group of Five program.

Boise State is a popular pick to land that berth again this season. Troy is a dark horse that, with a win on Saturday, could take a significant step toward that milestone in its recent growth as a program.

Troy reached eight wins five times at the FBS level under longtime coach Larry Blakeney, for whom the university's field is named. With a Top 25 ranking at one point in 2016, and last year's 11-2 finish with a share of the Sun Belt Conference championship, the Trojans have enjoyed success in Brown's four years leading the program.

"Neal Brown's done a great job there," Harsin said in his weekly press conference. "Defensively, five returning all-conference players, (and) they were 24th in the nation in total defense."

In addition to its total yardage yield of 337 per game, the Trojans' 18.5-point per game allowance ranked No. 11 in the FBS.

If anyone can appreciate Troy's defense of a season ago, it's Rypien. The Trojans held the Broncos to just 254 yards of total offense in last season's defensive slugfest at Boise State, which the hosts won 24-13.

"Their defense was especially good against us last year," said Rypien, who finished 19 of 32 for 210 yards. He was also intercepted by Troy cornerback Blace Brown, who ran the pick back 53 yards.

"I expect the same thing from them this year," Rypien added. "They have a really good defense. They had some guys step up at different positions last year."

Blace Brown is one of those Trojans who stepped up in 2017. His interception of Rypien was the first of five, tied for 11th in the nation.

Neal Brown called him an NFL-caliber performer, boasting an impressive combination of size, speed and awareness.

Saturday presents Blace Brown individually, and Troy as a team, a prime opportunity to make a significant statement -- not that it's necessary to spark the Trojans.

"There's going to be no need for any (extra) motivation," Blace Brown said.

PLAYERS TO WATCH**Broncos**

--QB Brett Rypien has battled consistency but he's had a productive career as he is the NCAA active leader in completions (735) and passing yards (9,876). He led Boise State to a Mountain West title last season -- as well as a bowl win over Oregon -- and can further cement his legacy with a big senior season. He wasn't prolific in last season's win over Troy, completing 13 of 23 passes for 160 yards, with an interception.

--STUD defensive ends Curtis Weaver and Jabril Frazier will each see plenty of time and are athletic terrors. Weaver, technically the backup, was a revelation as a freshman last season, making 11 sacks and earning first-team all-conference honors. Frazier had six sacks.

--DT David Moe -- nicknamed "The Moe Constrictor) has big-time potential beyond what the modest numbers from last season -- 21 tackles, two sacks -- say. At this point, he is rated as a late-round prospect by NFLDraftScout.com.

Trojans

--CB Marcus Jones picked off two passes last season as a true freshman and made an even bigger splash as a kick returner as he ranked seventh nationally in kick return average with a 30.3-yard average. He returned three kickoffs for scores. "He played a significant role on defense last year and he's going to start at corner this season, which I don't believe will hinder his return game on special teams," said coach Neal Brown.

--QB Kaleb Barker will get the Week 1 start for Troy, trying to fill the shoes of departed four-year starter Brandon Silvers. Barker last season passed for 143 yards and a touchdown, adding 181 yards and two scores on the ground. Coach Neal Brown said backup Sawyer Smith also will play in the opener. Both quarterbacks are good athletes.

TEXAS AT MARYLAND**GAME SNAPSHOT:****KICKOFF:** Saturday, noon ET**SITE:** FedExField, Landover, Maryland**TV:** FS1**SERIES:** Texas leads 3-1. Maryland won the last meeting 51-41 in 2017.**RANKINGS:** Texas No. 23**KEYS TO THE GAME**

Texas is hoping for a better start to the year than the Longhorns managed a year ago in Tom Herman's debut as their coach when they take on Maryland Saturday.

Kickoff at FedExField in Landover, Maryland, is at noon on the Fox Sports1 Network.

The two teams put on one of the best opening weekend shows a year ago with Maryland emerging with a 51-41 victory to spoil Herman's first game with the Longhorns.

The No. 23 Longhorns may have a bit of a psychological edge in the rematch with the Big Ten foe.

Maryland coach, DJ Durkin is suspended indefinitely in the fallout from the death of sophomore lineman Jordan McNair last June from heatstroke. The Terrapins, under interim coach Matt Canada, are anxious just to focus on football after the tumultuous offseason that is still rocking the program.

"We've all had grieving processes and things like that to deal with so we're helping each other," Canada said. "If somebody is having a tough day we try to help each other out. I think everything (the players have) dealt with they've done the best job they possibly could. I think we're as ready as we could be given the situation."

The Terrapins need to be ready against a Texas team that still remembers last year's upset at Texas Memorial Stadium in Austin. Maryland smashed the Longhorns up front, rushing for 263 yards and four touchdowns.

Even after starting quarterback Tyrrell Pigrome went down late in the third quarter with a knee injury, true freshman Kasim Hill came on to lead a couple of late scoring drives and salt away the big road win, the highlight of Durkin's career.

Hill is expected to start this week over Pigrome.

"This is a team in Maryland that they don't think they can beat you: They know they can beat you, because they have," Herman said. "There are a lot of guys on that team at Maryland that know that they've beaten Texas."

While no one outside of the meeting rooms and practice fields at Maryland is sure who will start at quarterback in Canada's pro offense, fittingly being played in a professional stadium, Herman & Co. won't take the Terrapins lightly.

"You've got to contain them," Herman said. "The offensive coordinator last year (Walt Bell) ... is now the offensive coordinator at Florida State. So now you're a little bit unsure."

Herman said the 'Horns had watched tape of what Canada's offenses did at LSU, Pittsburgh and North Carolina State, but the Texas defense would have to "take some educated guesses" until they saw exactly what the Terrapin attack looked like.

Canada isn't helping with a depth chart that lists three wide receivers, two tight ends and two running backs, including co-starters at one spot in Ty Johnson and Lorenzo Harrison. That duo combined for 177 yards against Texas last year, Johnson carving out 132 yards on 12 carries, the most Texas allowed to any runner all season.

Herman has had to make a quarterback call, too, opting for sophomore Sam Ehlinger over junior Shane Buechele, last year's opening day starter.

"Shane made it very difficult to make that decision, probably the hardest decision I've had to make as head coach and coordinator," said Herman. "We feel extremely good about our QB situation."

Last year, Ehlinger came on to become the first Longhorn quarterback to lead the team in both passing and rushing since Colt McCoy in 2008.

"Texas has some great talent," Canada said. "They do every year. It's going to be the second year for their staff. They certainly continued to get better last year on both sides of the ball. Very talented quarterback. He can run the ball, do certain things with the ball in his hand. I know our guys on defense realize what a great challenge this is."

PLAYERS TO WATCH**Longhorns**

--QB Sam Ehlinger, a sophomore, has been given the starting nod over junior Shane Buechele after the two signal callers split the starting position last season. Ehlinger played in nine games and freewheeled a lot of plays because they either broke down or he did not recognize other options in the speed of the game quickly enough to make the needed adjustments. From all reports, he has improved in recognition and execution across the board.

--WR Collin Johnson, a junior, is the huge, fast downfield target that Ehlinger needs to help open up the offense, and is due for a breakout season. He had 54 catches for 765 yards and two touchdowns in 2017 but over the final six weeks of the year had just 24 receptions for 230 yards (38.3 yards per game) and one touchdown, pedestrian numbers for a 6-foot-6 receiver than can go over or through most of the defensive backs that are covering him.

--LB Gary Johnson, a senior who came to Texas last year after playing in junior college, is set to step into the role of do-everything linebacker. At 6-foot and 230 pounds, Johnson might be a little undersized to be a constant run stuffer, but he plays bigger than his size and hits as hard as anyone in college football.

--CB Kris Boyd comes into his senior season with the ability to be a true shutdown corner -- as long as he can keep his emotions in check. At 6-foot and 195 pounds, Boyd has the size to take on and stop most of the receivers that will line up across from him on the right side, his preferred station. Boyd has started 20 of Texas' last 21 games, and racked up 57 tackles, recorded two interceptions and tallied 15 pass breakups last season.

Terrapins

--QB Kasim Hill is a prototype quarterback (6-2, 234) and perfectly suited to run Canada's pro-style offense. He was steady and often sensational all preseason camp in winning the job from good friend Tyrrell Pigrome, who Hill replaced last year when Pigrome was injured late in the Texas game. Then Hill was lost two weeks later with a knee injury. Efficiency (18-21 for 230 yards, two TDs and no interceptions) was his hallmark in last year's brief sampling.

--OT Derwin Gray emerged as a leader on Maryland's strong offensive line. The senior was honorable mention All-Big Ten last year and started all 12 games at left tackle. He helped power a running game that ground out over 160 yards per contest for the third straight year, and which will be the heart and soul of the team this year with all five starters back on the line and a deep and talented stable of runners. Maryland ran for 263 yards and averaged 6.1 yards per rush in last year's win over the Longhorns.

--DE Jesse Aniebonam was lost with a broken foot in the opener at Texas, and Maryland's pass rush never recovered, registering just 16 sacks in 12 games, and nine of those came in the first two weeks. Aniebonam had nine sacks in 2016 and is a speedy rush end that create havoc in an opponents' backfield, something the Terrapins rarely did much of last year.

BOWLING GREEN AT OREGON**GAME SNAPSHOT****KICKOFF:** Saturday, 8 p.m. ET**SITE:** Autzen Stadium, Eugene, Ore.**TV:** Pac-12 Networks**SERIES:** First meeting**RANKINGS:** Oregon No. 24**KEYS TO THE GAME**

As the 2018 season gets underway, No. 24 Oregon finds itself with more questions than answers.

The Ducks are going on their third head coach in as many years, and many are hoping that Mario Cristobal is the man to get Oregon flying high again.

"It's of course a high-emotion situation," Cristobal said about leading the Ducks on Saturday. "I mean football, you know for all of us, it's been such a big part of our lives, always will be for so many reasons -- so emotions are always going to be high, intensity is always going to be high."

Cristobal was tagged to be the leading man when former head coach Willie Taggart left for Florida State before last year's bowl game. Behind the support of the players, including many who signed a petition, Oregon's brass gave the position to Cristobal and the new era was underway.

The Ducks begin this era when they host Bowling Green on Saturday in Eugene, Ore.

"We certainly feel that we're coming off a very productive and successful training camp. We feel like there's a lot of positive energy and enthusiasm surrounding our program and our players," Cristobal said. "We certainly invest in doing a lot of the things necessary to take that next step as a program; from a disciplinary standpoint as it relates to penalties, from a strength and conditioning standpoint."

Bowling Green, picked to finish fifth in the Mid-American Conference East Division, is coming off a 2-10 finish last year. Quarterback Jarret Doege, who became the first true freshman to start at quarterback for the Falcons since 1986, returned late in the season from an injury. Bowling Green averaged 35.0 points in those four games.

"Where they pose a problem for you is they get the ball down the field in a hurry. They stretch the field," said Cristobal.

"You know they have a little bit of the air-raid mentality, and their receivers can stretch the field. They're big, they're tall, they're athletic, they've got good balance and body control, and they've shown that they can make big plays. They have a lot of big-play capability."

One thing Cristobal has going for him is a star at quarterback. Junior Justin Herbert is being named by many as a future first-round NFL draft pick.

Herbert returns after a rough season in 2017 when a shoulder injury sidelined him for five games. The Ducks were 6-2 in games Herbert started but just 1-4 when he was out.

Helping keep Herbert healthy will be the most experienced unit on the team, the offensive line. Cristobal has eight players who could start and all will see playing time. Juniors Jake Hanson, Calvin Throckmorton and Shane Lemieux have 75 combined starts the past two years while newcomers Dallas Warmack (junior) and Penei Sewell (freshman) add size and nastiness.

The skill players are bountiful with running back Tony Brooks-James and wide receivers Dillon Mitchell and Johnny Johnson III leading the way. The depth is massive at those positions with five players listed as backup at running back and newcomers Bryan Addison (freshman) and Tabari Hines (seniors) expected to make immediate impacts.

"The message to our players was this whole thing about playing time," Cristobal said. "It's really about trust, earning the trust of your teammates, earning the trust of your coaches, you know, trusting in yourself."

The defense, under second-year coordinator Jim Leavitt, is looking to take another step forward.

Preseason all-American junior linebacker Troy Dye leads a unit returning eight starters, yet all listed starters on the depth chart saw significant action last year. Senior defensive end Jalen Jelks is a future NFL player while sophomore nose tackle Jordon Scott was named to multiple freshman all-American teams last year.

Bowling Green is led by a multitude of receivers, none more accomplished than senior Scott Miller, a smaller, shifter receiver who's on the verge of top-10 career receptions for the Falcons.

Flanking him are behemoths Deric Phouthavong (6-foot-5) and Quinton Morris (6-4). Both players pose problems for the Ducks as Oregon's tallest starting defensive back is Pickett at 6-1.

Altogether, the Ducks return 15 starters from last season's 7-6 team; out of the 22 projected starters, 18 started at least three games last year.

After disappearing for two years, optimism has returned to the Emerald Valley. With Oregon's first three games coming against inferior teams, the Ducks are hoping to get off to a fast start before that late-September showdown with No. 13 Stanford.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Falcons

--QB Jarret Doege started five games last season and completed 120 of 188 passes (63.8 percent), with 14 touchdowns and three interceptions. "Excited about this season. Just one more year confident," he said.

--OLB Brandon Harris has made 24 career starts, tied for the most on the team. He recovered three fumbles last season for a defense that otherwise took plenty of lumps, finishing 126th in total defense and coming up with only 15 sacks. "We have a lot of new schemes and new packages," Harris said. New coordinator Carl Pelini put in a 4-2-5 base in the spring with an emphasis on the Falcons playing more aggressively.

--RB Andrew Clair showed promise as a freshman, leading Bowling Green with 725 yards on 107 carries for a healthy 6.8-yard average.

Ducks

--QB Justin Herbert put on substantial weight during the offseason to better withstand punishment. One of the early Heisman favorites, Herbert stands 6-foot-6 and weighs 240 pounds. Combine that with above-average athleticism and a rocket for an arm, it's no wonder why he's receiving all the preseason hype. When leading the Ducks last year, Oregon went 6-2 and averaged 49.1 points per game, showing off the type of prolific offense the nation has been accustomed to seeing. Watching how Herbert controls the offense and connects with his multitude of options will be key in how Oregon does this year.

--CB Thomas Graham Jr. is as important a player on Oregon's defense as they come. He gained valuable experience by starting the final 12 games last year and after a great offseason, he's expected to emerge as an all-conference player. If Graham can solidify the small side of the field, particularly against a Bowling Green team that will air it out, it could be huge for Oregon's development down the road.

MIAMI (F) AT LSU**GAME SNAPSHOT:****KICKOFF:** Sunday, 7:30 p.m. ET**SITE:** AT&T Stadium, Arlington, Texas**TV:** ABC**SERIES:** LSU leads 9-3. The Tigers won the last meeting 40-3 in the 2005 Peach Bowl.**RANKINGS:** Miami No. 8, LSU No. 25**KEYS TO THE GAME**

It will be a matchup of two teams looking to validate their national credentials when No. 8 Miami takes on No. 25 LSU Sunday at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas.

Kickoff is slated for 7:30 p.m. ET with ABC telecasting the action.

The Hurricanes thrust themselves into the College Football Playoff conversation last November after by winning their first 10 games, but they faded by losing their regular-season finale against Pittsburgh, the ACC Championship game against Clemson, and the Orange Bowl against Wisconsin.

The Tigers' season was nearly the reverse. They struggled to a 3-2 start, which included a shocking loss to Troy, before winning six of their last seven prior to a Citrus Bowl loss to Notre Dame.

Both these programs are trying to return to the status of perennial national-championship contenders. Miami appears to be farther along in that regard as evidenced by the two teams' preseason rankings.

"Until you play somebody, you really don't know," said Miami coach Mark Richt, who is beginning his third season at his alma mater. "There are no warm-up games here. We will be physically and mentally tested. It will be a gut check, at the very least."

It will be the same for LSU, which lists just four seniors as starters.

Miami has a fifth-year senior and returning starter at quarterback in Malik Rosier, whereas LSU just named its starter Monday. Junior Joe Burrow, a graduate transfer from Ohio State, will make his first collegiate start, though sophomore Myles Brennan could also see some action.

Rosier's season last year mirrored that of his team as a whole as the productivity dropped off dramatically during the three-game losing streak at the end. His completion percentage was 54 percent overall, but just 44.9 percent in the final three games.

"When you watch what happened last year -- he made a lot of big plays in some really big moments, and without it, we're not going to win," Richt said. "He made some great plays with his wheels, he ran the ball well and did some things that if he doesn't do the things that he did, we probably don't win 10 games last year."

Burrow and Brennan competed throughout preseason camp and Burrow prevailed by a very small margin, LSU coach Ed Orgeron said.

Even though Burrow didn't arrive on campus until after spring practice, he quickly learned the offense and endeared himself to his coaches and his teammates by the way he worked.

"He came in here very low key and competed at every event," Orgeron said. "I remember the first day we ran our conditioning test and he was in a bunch of sprints and he didn't say a word."

"In the film room, on his own, studying. In the weight room, working hard. When he had a chance to, he took command of the offense, showed leadership. He made some mistakes, wasn't perfect, but he showed true leadership and an ability to command the offense."

Both teams figure to have exceptional defense and the Tigers received a boost when junior cornerback Kristian Fulton was unexpectedly reinstated by the NCAA after serving a one-year suspension for tampering with his sample during a drug test.

Orgeron wouldn't say if Fulton or Kelvin Joseph would start, but Fulton is likely to play as much as his conditioning will allow.

"I don't think I'll be rusty," Fulton said. "But at practice at LSU, we go up against some good players, so I feel like I'll be prepared when the time comes for the game."

After the game, one program is going to feel like it's closer to returning to its heyday than the other will. Richt said he's not concerned that the lofty praise given to his team will make his players feel prematurely satisfied.

"When you play LSU, Game 1, in this type of game, in this setting that we're going to be in, you can't help but think, 'I better get ready,'" Richt said. "I think that's what everyone is thinking -- 'we better get ready.'"

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Hurricanes

--QB Malik Rosier will be looking to bounce back from a dismal finish to last season when he finished just 40-of-89 passing in Miami's last three games, all losses. A senior backed up by two freshmen, Rosier was named the starter early in camp. "He's been very accurate," coach Mark Richt said. "He's not perfect. No one's perfect. Malik has control of the game better and is more comfortable with what we're doing."

--RB Trevor Homer was thrown into the starting role after a season-ending injury to Mark Walton in the fourth game of the season and responded by rushing for 966 yards for the season. A junior, he will be complemented by speedster Dee Jay Dallas and power runner Trayone Gray, who also plays fullback.

--DE Gerald Willis sat out last season for personal reasons but after getting things together was a scout team demon. He followed that up with a strong spring and will man one of the tackle spots against LSU and its running-back-by-committee approach.

--LB Shaq Quarterman will man the middle when Miami was in a 4-3 set as he begins a third consecutive season as a starter. He and fellow freshmen Zach McCloud and Michael Pinckney have started from their freshman seasons in 2016. Quarterman had 83 tackles and broke up five passes last year.

Tigers

--QB Joe Burrow is the man on the spot. He beat out Myles Brennan, who was brought in two years ago with the expectation that he would become the starter at some point, presumably this season after Danny Etling graduated. But Burrow won the job and now he will lead his new team against a formidable Miami defense that has one of the fiercest back sevens in all of college football and which finished third in the country in takeaways last season.

--CB Kristian Fulton was just reinstated by the NCAA a few days ago after serving a one-year suspension for tampering with a drug test. His availability is seen as a big boost to the Tigers' secondary. He's listed as a co-starter with Kelvin Joseph and even if he's not on the field for the first defensive snap he likely will play as much as his conditioning will allow. The Hurricanes figure to avoid Greedy Williams on the other side and attack Fulton and Joseph.

--DE Glen Logan had an impressive redshirt freshman season last year and he was a standout in the offseason program. Rashard Lawrence will attract a lot of attention at the other end spot and with Breiden Fehoko having moved from end to tackle while Ed Alexander works his way back to full-time status from a knee problem, it will be up to Logan to complement Lawrence with a strong push.

VIRGINIA TECH AT FLORIDA STATE**GAME SNAPSHOT:****KICKOFF:** Monday, 8 p.m. ET**SITE:** Doak Campbell Stadium, Tallahassee, Fla.**TV:** ABC**SERIES:** Florida State leads 23-12**RANKINGS:** Florida State No. 19, Virginia Tech No. 20**KEYS TO THE GAME**

Both No. 20 Virginia Tech and No. 19 Florida State have a lot riding on Monday's primetime season opener.

But Seminoles senior offensive lineman Alec Eberle might just have the most at stake.

"I can't ever go back home (if we lose)," Eberle, a Virginia native, said this week.

Eberle, of course, was joking about being banished from his native state if Florida State can't defend its home turf at Doak Campbell Stadium on Monday night against the Hokies, who won't be smiling one bit; they're coming to town serious about stealing a win from the 7-point favorite Seminoles.

"There's no better way than to open up at Florida State, at their place," Hokies defensive tackle Ricky Walker told the Roanoke Times.

Added tight end Dalton Keene: "I can't wait, and I know the rest of the guys can't wait either."

The Hokies, who finished 9-4 last season, return 12 starters -- seven on offense, five on defense. In head coach Justin Fuente's third season at the helm, Virginia Tech started 2017 red hot at 7-1, then lost three of its last five games, including to Oklahoma State in the Camping World Bowl.

One of those key returning players is sophomore quarterback Josh Jackson, who will lead the offense once again this year after throwing for 2,991 yards and 20 touchdowns in his rookie campaign. Jackson hopes his defense -- one of the best in the Atlantic Coast Conference a year ago with three shutouts of opponents -- will give him plenty of opportunities to shine Monday night.

New Florida State head coach Willie Taggart, meanwhile, hopes for the opposite in his first-ever game wearing garnet and gold.

"We've spent a lot of time looking forward to this," Taggart said Wednesday. "Game week from this point on is all gas and no brakes, and really excited about watching our guys go out and perform Monday night."

Taggart was hired away from Oregon in December of last year after then-Florida State head coach Jimbo Fisher bolted for Texas A&M following nine years in Tallahassee, where he delivered the Seminoles their third national championship in program history in 2013. While it may seem like big shoes to fill for Taggart, Fisher's final year resulted in a 7-6 season and the program was a bit of a mess when Taggart took over.

Now, the only place to go for Taggart -- who is only the third head coach Florida State has had in the last 42 years -- is up.

And it starts Monday night.

"It means a lot to be able to lead this program and to be able to try to stand on the shoulders of those guys (before me, Bobby Bowden and Jimbo Fisher) that came before me and did a great job here. Says a lot about this program (that I'm only their third head coach since 1976)," Taggart said.

"Says those guys before me won a lot. Got to go out and win a lot of ballgames if I want to be a part of those two."

Florida State brings a mix of youth and experience into the game. The Seminoles returned 12 starters -- eight on offense, four on defense. Although, the biggest returner is easily quarterback Deondre Francois, who missed most of last year after suffering a knee injury in Week 1 against Alabama. Francois had to battle two teammates -- sophomore James Blackman and freshman Bailey Hockman -- to regain the starting job, and he was announced as the starter earlier this week by Taggart.

Francois, who was named the 2016 ACC Offensive Rookie of the Year during his freshman season, will have plenty of help to get Florida State back to where it was two years ago when he went 10-3 as the starter. Star rusher from a season ago, sophomore Cam Akers, is back after rushing for a freshman school record 1,024 yards. And the Seminoles' backfield will have a 1-2 punch with running back Jacques Patrick, a senior, opting to return for his senior season, rather than bolt for the NFL.

The Seminoles lead the all-time series with the Hokies 23-12-1, but they haven't played since 2012 when Florida State beat them 28-22 in Blacksburg, Va.. At the time, Hokies legend Frank Beamer was still Virginia Tech's coach, and that game was two years removed from the retirement of fellow coaching legend Bobby Bowden at Florida State.

Beamer and Bowden will both return for Monday night's game and serve as honorary captains before the kickoff -- a moment Taggart said Wednesday will likely give him chills.

"I get goosebumps every time I see Coach Bowden," said Taggart, who grew up a Florida State fan. "Very happy for him to be back on that field. To start the season off for us as honorary captain ... I think it will be a great day for him. We'll make sure that we go out and perform for him so he can be happy with the 'Noles."

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Hokies

--WR Damon Hazelton, a transfer from Ball State, earned raves for his play at practice last season when he was ineligible. Although he missed most of the spring with an undisclosed injury, he showed in fall camp that he should be a significant factor this season. Hazelton caught 51 passes in 2016 for Ball State.

--DT Ricky Walker had a breakthrough season in 2017 with 41 tackles, including 12.5 for loss and 4.5 sacks. Now a graduate -- he earned his degree in sociology in May -- he also became a father over the summer. Against Florida State, he needs to be prepared to handle coach Willie Taggart's up-tempo play-calling and to plug up the running lanes for RB Cam Akers.

--DEs Trevon Hill and Houshun Gaines, both juniors, are solid starters at a position of depth for Virginia Tech. They combined for 8.5 sacks last season, and those numbers can expect to improve. Coordinator Bud Foster loves his young crew behind them, so expect a healthy rotation to keep legs fresh. In particular, watch for redshirt freshman TyJuan Garbutt and sophomore Emmanuel Belmar.

Seminoles

--RB Cam Akers, a former high school quarterback who switched to running back once he got to Florida State, broke the freshman rushing record last season set by former star RB Dalvin Cook only a few seasons earlier. Akers rushed for 1,024 yards and seven touchdowns in 2017. He will share most of the carries in the backfield with senior Jacques Patrick, who is more of a bruising runner, while Akers has blazing, breakaway speed.

--TE Tre' McKitty waited patiently last season behind two older, more experienced tight ends, but the buzz around fall camp is that he's ready to take over and is going to be a force to be reckoned with in the passing game this year. McKitty ran an astounding 4.5 40-yard dash in high school -- not bad for a guy who stands 6-foot-5, 245 pounds -- so the speed is there. McKitty, who sat behind Ryan Izzo (NFL) and Mavin Saunders (transferred to Kansas), will see the bulk of the tight end targets this season.

--DT Demarcus Christmas, a senior, has started 26 straight games for the Seminoles and he's made it clear he plans to be a leader on the defense in his final season. At 6-foot-4, 308 pounds, Christmas has all the physical tools to be dominating this year, but he needs to find more ways to get to the quarterback after only recording one sack in 2017.