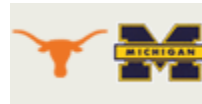


COLLEGE FOOTBALL BOWL BREAKDOWN BY: MATTHEW HATFIELD



Pittsburgh QB Tyler Palko and the 8-3 Panthers take on Utah in the Fiesta Bowl.



Southern Cal faces Oklahoma for all the marbles in the FedEx Orange Bowl.

Photo Courtesy of ESPN

Wyndham New Orleans Bowl --- Tuesday, December 14 @ 7:30PM on ESPN



North Texas (7-4) V. Southern Miss (6-5)



Before the season started I correctly projected North Texas to play Southern Miss in the New Orleans Bowl. Well what do you know here we are with the Mean Green and Golden Eagles ready to start the bowl season. I'm going to throw a curve ball from my preseason pick, and instead of taking North Texas pick Southern Miss. Here's why:

North Texas has essentially turned into the Sun Belt Conference's powerhouse team, making its fourth straight New Orleans Bowl appearance. In order for them to even their postseason mark to 2-2, freshman running back Jamario Thomas (189.89YPG - 1st in nation) will have to go off. His matchup pairing him up against Southern Miss linebacker Michael Boley, who made 151 tackles and 11 sacks last season, is one of great intrigue. Even if Thomas, who has done a remarkable job replacing last season's national rushing leader Patrick Cobbs, does run well can NT pass the ball effectively? We're pretty sure So. Miss will with QB Dustin Almond delivering throws over the top of North Texas' loose, soft coverage to big, fast pass catchers Antwon Courington, DaRon Lawrence and Marvin Young. Protecting Almond from DE Adrian Awasom will be key. SM's tougher conference competition and game vs. Cal also prepares them better.



So. Miss Head Coach Jeff Bower has not had a losing season in 10+ years.

Statline: North Texas' great offensive line has blocked for back-to-back rushing kings in Patrick Cobbs (1680Yds. in 2003) and freshman Jamario Thomas.



North Texas tailback Jamario Thomas (right) had a fabulous freshman season filling in for Patrick Cobbs (L).

SU Pick: Southern Miss 27-13 ATS Pick: SM -5.5 LOCK

Champs Sports Bowl --- Tuesday, December 21 @ 7:45PM on ESPN



Georgia Tech (6-5) V. Syracuse (6-5)



Formerly known as the Tangerine Bowl, a pair of mediocre teams - Georgia Tech and Syracuse - take the field in the Champs Sports Bowl. So why should I convince you to watch this one? Well, the game will probably be close, competitive and go down to the wire. If that's not enough for you, then get an early peek at the next potentially great wide receiver in college football. Freshman Calvin Johnson has spectacular ability and led the Yellow Jackets in receiving with 776 yards. At 6-4 215 pounds, Johnson poses problems for the Orange defense just like he did in the ACC this past season. He should be able to stretch the field and allow Reggie Ball to get comfortable early.

On the Syracuse side of things it's all about running the football. Walter Reyes did it magnificently each of the last two seasons going over the 1,000 yard barrier and rushing for 37 touchdowns during that span. Injuries have limited him this year and backup Damien Rhodes has done rather well in his place gaining 856 yards and 10TD. In fact Rhodes suffered a minor injury in the team's regular season finale vs. Boston College forcing them to go to defensive headliner Diamond Ferri (4Int. and TD). Despite less than 100 yards passing and 2INT from QB Perry Patterson, the strong safety Ferri ran it 28 times for 141 yards and two scores to lead them to a 43-17 road win. I guess what I'm getting at it is this team can go to a few different guys if need be to run the ball. Georgia Tech has struggled in the turnover department in 2004. Their defense has some quality playmakers like sack artist Eric Henderson, linebacker Gerris Wilkerson and S James Butler. Don't rule out them making things extremely tough on Paul Pasqualoni's crew.

Statline: Orange defense has plenty of freshmen and sophomores. That sometimes, in fact most of the time, can be a not so good thing. It's a big reason why they've allowed 30 or more six times this year, including 51 to Purdue in September.



Photo Courtesy of ESPN

Calvin Johnson has hauled in six TD's for the Yellow Jackets, while Syracuse RB Walter Reyes has found the end zone 46 times in his career.

SU Pick: Ga. Tech 28-20

ATS Pick: GT -4.5

GMAC Bowl --- Wednesday, December 22 @ 8PM on ESPN



Bowling Green (8-3) V. Memphis (8-3)



Besides the National Championship between USC and Oklahoma and the Louisville-Boise State showdown, this may be the most exciting bowl game. No, that's not a misprint, nor did I stutter. Bowling Green and Memphis each share an 8-3 record and two of the best college football stars practically nobody talks about. Memphis' DeAngelo Williams ran for 1430 yards and ten scores as a sophomore in 11 games prior to an injury vs. Cincinnati last season. Opposite Williams is Bowling Green sophomore QB Omar Jacobs, who had the daunting task of replacing a man that produced over 4600 yards of offense and 40 touchdowns - Josh Harris. Jacobs' blazing speed behind center and large frame similar to that of Harris has enabled him to takeover the offense without much difficulty (36-3 TD/Int. ratio). Speaking of center, Falcons middle man Scott Mrczkowski has an interesting matchup with Memphis defensive lineman Albert Means, kind of a d-end/d-tackle tweener. That's the head-to-head matchup to watch.



Gamebreakers! Defining of both Memphis running back DeAngelo Williams (1828Yds.) and BG gunslinger Omar Jacobs (40 Total TD's and 3637 Pass Yards).

Memphis tends to run a 3-3-5 defense and it helped them place 20th or better in the four major defensive statistical categories in 2003. This season's been a different story as the Tigers are 111th vs. the pass (BG's #100 - facing good Memphis wideouts). It'll be telling early whether or not they drop a couple extra guys back in coverage and can Bowling Green counter that by giving the rock to P.J. Pope (947Yds. 13TD). Remember, QB/punter Danny Wimprine has weapons on the other side of the ball, too.

Statline: All three of Bowling Green's losses have come away from home. Amazingly they haven't lost at home since November of 2001.

SU Pick: Memphis 38-34

ATS Pick: Mem +4.5

UPSET

PlainsCapital Fort Worth Bowl --- Thursday, December 23 @ 6:30PM on ESPN



Cincinnati (6-5) V. Marshall (6-5)



Cincinnati vs. Marshall in the PlainsCapital Fort Worth Bowl is not the most glamorous game of the 2004-05 bowl season. One game going the other way for either Marshall and Cincinnati and they're 5-6 at home for the holidays. Then you look at the way how each played vs. bowl teams/non conference opponents. Marshall beat fellow MAC foe Miami of Ohio back in late September to salvage a rough month (1-3 in September). The Thundering Herd disappointingly lost to Troy in their season opener, but lost on the road at Ohio State and Georgia by an average of just 6.5 points. Bob Pruett has had better teams in the past when NFL QB's Chad Pennington and Byron Leftwich led the charge. In fact, in Pruett's nine seasons with Marshall he has won ten or more games six times. For Cincinnati Head Coach Mark Dantonio in his first season since coming over from Ohio State as the defensive coordinator, it's been kind of up and down the whole way through. They answered a 21-point road loss to Ohio State by defeating Miami of Ohio. The lowest it got was on October 9th at Army when they lost by 19 as 16-point favorites to drop to 2-4. Cincy responded with four straight C-USA wins over Memphis, TCU, Southern Mississippi and South Florida.



Quarterback Stan Hill can boost his draft stock by passing Marshall to a victory over Jamar Enzor (8Tack., sack and a forced fumble vs. Ohio State) and the Cincinnati Bearcats.

Josh Davis is one in a long line of successful Marshall pass catchers. Following the likes of Randy Moss and Darius Watts, Davis has recorded 300+ career receptions. He may be the difference for Marshall, whereas Cincy's Gino Guidugli really doesn't have the type of playmakers his opponent has. Watch out for DE Jonathan Goodard and junior DB Chris Royal on defense for Marshall. Goodard's 15 sacks and 23TFL are tops in the MAC and nation, while his 5FF are only bettered by Texas' Derrick Johnson. Royal has come off the bench to intercept six passes for 103 yards. There's no clear cut favorite so like the Memphis-Bowling Green game it's a coin flip according to many.

SU Pick: Marshall 30-14

ATS Pick: Marsh +1.5

Pioneer PureVision Las Vegas Bowl --- Thursday, December 23 @ 9:45PM on ESPN



UCLA (6-5) V. Wyoming (6-5)



Mostly everyone picked Wyoming to finish last in the Mountain West conference including myself. Guess by now you can figure out that I, like many, was wrong considering the Cowboys are playing in their first bowl game in 11 years. But how did 6-5 Wyoming become bowl eligible when they failed to bust the top 40 in any of the four main offensive or defensive stat categories? Very simple. First off, the Mountain West this year is pretty average to put it kindly. Secondly, Wyoming's soft non-conference schedule consisting of Appalachian State, UL Monroe, a down Ole Miss team and Texas A&M (the lone bowl participant of the four) helped their overall record. Last but not least, special teams and turnover margin were areas Wyoming excelled greatly in.

Statline: Wyoming's current five-game bowl losing streak is the second longest in the nation next to Notre Dame's six-game skid.

Now don't think for a minute UCLA has blown us all away either. **Even though they hung with USC all game long, Karl Dorrell's Bruins failed to beat someone with a winning record.** That certainly speaks volumes for how far the 1998-99 Pac-10 champs have fallen. UCLA finished 4-4 in conference play largely because they have the luxury of owning explosive players on the offensive side. One of them is tailback Maurice Drew, who averaged 6.5 yards per carry and scored 11 touchdowns. Drew's best game of the year came against Washington three months ago when he ran for 322 yards on 26 attempts and found the zone on five different occasions. Over the last three games he's lost 11 yards and had to split time in the backfield with senior Manny White (761Yds. 8TD). White is capable of consistently pounding through the teeth of the defense for 3-6 yards per pop. Stopping the opposition's rushing attack has been the huge Achilles heel for UCLA all year. Not to mention, replacing Dave Ball's 16.5 sacks has been laughable when you take into account they've got less than 20 as a unit. Linebacker Spencer Havner (125Tack. 2Int.), Jarrad Page and Ben Emanuel II (both have 70+ tackles) are the impact players on defense. Luckily for Dorrell and company the Cowboys struggle to making things happen run wise and the game is not in Laramie where Joe Glenn's bunch is 5-1. Wyoming QB Corey Bramlet is going to have to carefully pick his spots vs. a pretty decent secondary gifted enough to break up passes and also pick some off.

Keys to the Game: UCLA --- No or very few turnovers..... really need to focus on getting the perimeter gamebreakers Lewis, Drew and Bragg involved heavily. Wyoming --- Obstruct Olson's throwing view..... don't settle for field goals on short 4th down situations, show UCLA you're there to win by going for it on 4th.

SU Pick: UCLA 34-10

ATS Pick: UCLA -12.5

LOCK

Sheraton Hawaii Bowl --- Friday, December 24 @ 7PM on ESPN



UAB (7-4) V. Hawaii (7-5)



The discrepancy between run and pass for Hawaii is absolutely startling to the point where it's almost alarmingly harming them. In 12 games regular season games in 2004 Hawaii threw the ball 589 times, an average of 49.083 per game compared to 20.66 runs a contest (248 total). Having all that said, it's got to be huge for Hawaii fans to hear that UAB is 106th out of 117 teams nationally versus the pass. To go even further - UAB allows well over twice as many yards through the air as the national pass defense leader Alabama. It's simply going to come down to whether or not UAB's defense can force turnovers. Timmy Chang has 13 interceptions on the season so he's good for about one per contest. To be blunt with all the Alabama-Birmingham people, the Blazers are not going to stop the Warriors aerial assault, period. Chang has thrown for over 3800 yards and 34 touchdowns this season, connecting with three different receivers for 700+ yards and 49+ receptions. Watson Brown's lone hope is for his team to outscore Hawaii.

A good Offense doesn't necessarily translate into a good Defense: Hawaii was unable to crack the top 110 in scoring defense in 2004. Completely different offensively as only nine D-1A schools scored more points than June Jones' squad.

Like the Bowling Green-Memphis game and Louisville-Boise there will be no shortage of scoring on Christmas Eve. The one thing UAB quarterback Darrell Hackney needed to improve upon from last season was his 50.8 completion percentage. Hackney (24TD-7Int.) has completed 54.6% of his attempts this year and his favorite target by far is Roddy White. Chad Owens certainly could be a difference maker on special teams for Hawaii and also keep an eye peeled for corner Abraham Elimimian (9Int. past two years).



On November 6th vs. La. Tech, Timmy Chang broke the NCAA career passing record formerly set by Ty Detmer.

Did You Know? This is UAB's first ever bowl appearance.

SU Pick: Hawaii 42-36

ATS Pick: HI -3.5 LOCK (OV 76)

MPC Computers Bowl --- Monday, December 27 @ 2PM on ESPN



Fresno State (8-3) V. Virginia (8-3)



In the MPC Computers Bowl (used to be the Humanitarian Bowl) we have two very strong defensive teams going at one another. It's been kind of a roller coaster season for Fresno State as has it for U.V.A. Pat Hill's Bulldogs began the season winning road games against Kansas State and Washington by a combined score of 80-37. Following a 3-0 start, Fresno faltered mightily losing to WAC foes Louisiana Tech, UTEP and Boise State consecutively. The non-BCS conference darling that was expected to possibly crash the party was in serious trouble and the injury to running back Dwayne Wright did not make matters any better. Meanwhile, Virginia started the season off strongly, too winning its first five games. Although, a weak non-conference slate consisting of Akron, Syracuse and Temple seemed to bite them in the rear later on, dashing any plans of representing the ACC in the Sugar Bowl. UVA lost to ACC opponents Florida State (on the road) Miami and Va. Tech (also away from home). Al Groh's recruited some supreme athletes there.



Al Groh (right) is starting to make a name for himself not only as a good Head Football Coach, but also as a master recruiter. Fresno State has been traditionally near the top of its conference standings ever since Pat Hill (left) got there back in 1997.

Virginia's offensive line is one of the best in the country as they are led by two potential first round NFL Draft picks in D'Brickshaw Ferguson and the punishing Elton Brown. How Fresno State's outstanding d-line, which kept Darren Sproles in check earlier this year, does versus them trying to slow down Marques Hagans and backs Alvin Pearman and Wali Lundy will be critical. Even though the game is in Boise, Idaho where Fresno's used to playing, I like Virginia because they're linebackers are quick to the ball and tight end Heath Miller can make awesome plays. For the Bulldogs to win QB Paul Pinegar must complete passes with pinpoint accuracy vs. a mediocre secondary.

SU Pick: Virginia 24-17

ATS Pick: VA -5.5